



CHRISTMAS WITH THE **KINGS**

a **KINGS OF GUARDIAN** Novella



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A CHRISTMAS WITH THE
KINGS

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KMRW LLC

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Also by Kris Michaels

FOREWORD

Author's note:

This novella—all tied up in shiny paper and wrapped with a satin bow—is a holiday offering to all those readers who have fallen in love with the characters in Kings of Guardian and the Guardian Shadow World series and made them their own. Inside these pages are glimpses into the family lives of Jacob and Tori, Adam and Keelee, Frank and Amanda, Jared and Christian, and all the others. The story unfolds three weeks prior to a particularly memorable Christmas at “The Ranch.” If you are concerned about reading order, consider this offering as the Kings of Guardian Book 11.5.

Please note: THERE IS NO BACKSTORY INCLUDED IN THIS NOVELLA.

This novella is *not* for you if you have not read the previous books in this series. You will not understand the characters or the dynamics. If you have not read all the Kings of Guardian and Guardian Shadow World series, please consider not buying this story.

For my readers who have followed me on this journey... I hope you enjoy a glimpse into the life of my Guardians.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Readers,

My editor told me that I needed to include a who's who listing in this book as I don't provide any background or remind you of the backstory for anyone in this novella. So, this is a quick down and dirty about the main characters, and offspring, to date.

Patriarch & Matriarch of the Marshall-King Family:

Frank Marshall is the widowed father of Victoria and Keelee Marshall. Amanda King is the widowed mother of Joseph, Justin, twin sisters Jasmine and Jade, Jason, Jewell, Jared and Jacob King. (For those of you who have asked, this is the birth order of the siblings.) She and Frank are now married to each other. She is now Amanda King-Marshall.

Marshall & King Children

Jacob King is married to Victoria (Marshall) King They have four sons, Talon, Trace, Tanner, and the baby, Tristan.

Joseph King is married to Ember (Harris) King. They have one son, Blake King.

Doctor Adam Cassidy is married to Keelee (Marshall) Cassidy. They have one daughter, Elizabeth (Lizzy) Cassidy.

Jason King is married to Faith (Collins) King. They have one son, Reece King.

Jared King is married to Christian (Koehler) King.

Jasmine King is married to Chad Nelson. They have one daughter, Chloe Nelson.

Jewell King is married to Zane Reynolds.

Jade King is involved with Nicolas DeMarco.

Justin King is engaged to Danielle (Dani) Grant.

The following characters, while not related by blood, are considered their “children” in the eyes of Frank and Amanda Marshall:

Drake Simmons is involved with Doctor Jillian Law. Drake has an identical twin, Dixon, whose love interest is unknown at the time of this story. **Yes, I do know, but I'm not telling... LOL!**

Mike White Cloud (Chief) is involved with Tatyana (Taty) Petrov.

Kaeden Lang (Anubis) is married to Sky Meyers-Lang. They have a daughter, Kadey Lang.

CHAPTER 1

Jade King took a deep breath and stopped outside the door to gather herself. The Guardian Security conference room was empty, but any minute, a number of valuable assets would walk through that door. For an entire week, she'd debated the pros and cons of calling this meeting. She hated to acknowledge she might have taken on an operation requiring more than her solo skills, but time had evaporated, and if she wanted this operation to succeed, she needed to call in some specialists—the “A” team. She rolled her eyes and snorted in disgust. She'd thrown her best effort into it. She'd gone into reconnaissance mode and had spent the last four days doing intense research. The groundwork was laid for the operation. The structure was there... basically... maybe... but the logistics of getting it all to come together? For this particular mission, the logistics portion was astoundingly confusing. Fuck her standing. She had no idea so many moving pieces and details were involved. No idea. Dammit, none of this was ever supposed to have happened. She'd never felt so ill-prepared, and that pissed her off, which made getting shit done even harder.

She glanced down at the printed version of the email she'd sent earlier this morning.

>Urgent. Assistance required. Main conference room. 1400hrs. Today. <

Her assets had acknowledged receipt of the email and had confirmed their attendance. She was screwed with a capital ‘S’ if they refused to help. She took a deep breath and opened the

massive door. The metaphor clobbered her. By coming here and asking for help, she would be doing exactly that—opening a massive door—especially when she laid out her plans and intentions for this op.

She turned on the light before hitting the button on the remote to fog the glass walls and door. Her satchel hit the dark wood of the conference room table, and she pulled three folders and two notebooks out. An unprecedented event two weeks ago triggered her need for help today. Jade hadn't told anyone about what had transpired. Hell, it was intel she held close to her vest. But, but in to order ensure things happened according to *her* plan, she needed help, and that meant releasing some highly sensitive information.

Her attention snapped to the door. Victoria, her sister-in-law, and Jewell, her sister, walked in. Jade hit the remote to lock the door behind them. It made an audible click.

Victoria glanced from the door to Jade. “So, what’s the crisis you referenced in your email? It was cryptic.” Tori gracefully walked around the table and sat down in one of the plush leather chairs. As always, she was beautifully put together, her make-up, hair, and clothing were all runway ready.

Jewell threw a bag of fruit-flavored chews on top of the table and flopped into a chair before asking, “What’s up, buttercup? Why the secrecy?” Her black hair was pulled up into a messy bun. Three yellow, #2 pencils poked out of the untamed mess. She wore her husband’s hoodie over... yoga pants.

Jade gawked at her sister. “Why are you wearing yoga pants?”

“Because I’m off today. I wasn’t planning on coming in.”

“Oh.” Jade glanced at her watch. It was Saturday. Damn, how did she not notice it was the fucking weekend? The days had blurred together. She stood up and started pacing behind her chair. Her sweaty palms ran up and down her shirt sleeves as she mentally debated the wisdom of asking for help. Fuck it. She just needed to get it out there. It was time to do this.

She stopped behind her chair and picked up two of the three folders she'd put on the table. "I need your help with an... well for the lack of any better term, an operation. This needs to be kept confidential. Nobody can know about this unless I specifically approve it. If this information gets out..." Jade ran her hand through her hair, pulling it away from her face. She looked at the women across the table from her. "It could be a mess of biblical proportions."

Tori leaned forward. "What case is this? Overseas or domestic?"

Tori glanced at Jewell who shrugged. "Seriously, I have no idea what hot mess she's working on. I like it that way. Keeps my ass out of the fire."

Jade snorted and slid the files across the table. "Before you open those folders, I want your assurance this will remain between us."

Tori looked from the green folder to Jewell and then back to Jade. "How much trouble is this going to get me into with Jacob, or hell, for that matter, Jason?"

Jade slumped back into the leather cushion of her chair and groaned. "None that I'm aware of, and as this operation progresses, we may have to bring them into it, but I hope like hell we can keep it contained."

Jewell reached for a fruit chew, leaned back in her chair and lifted her feet up onto the leather seat as she squinted her eyes at Jade. "Jason doesn't know about this? What have you gotten yourself into?"

Jade shook her head. "Not until you assure me this information stays between us."

Jewell shrugged. "Until it becomes illegal or immoral, I'm in." She unwrapped the candy and popped it into her mouth. "As illegal is a grey area for me, you've got wide latitude."

Tori's eyebrows rose skyward at Jewell's comment. She turned to Jade. "I need to know what it is. If I can't buy in, I'll walk, but I won't share anything from this brief. Will that work for you?"

“That’s fair enough.” Jade held her hand out stopping the women from opening the folders. “Before you look at those, I need to show you this.”

She unzipped a small side pocket located on the outside of her satchel and reached her fingers in searching for...*ahh, there it was*. She extracted the item and positioned it before she lifted her hand.

The earth-shattering squeal damn near ruptured her eardrum. Thank God the conference room was in privacy mode and soundproof.

“You’re engaged! Oh. My. God!” Jewell ran around the table and slammed into Jade. The tackle hug was awesome and horrible at the same time. Jewell’s squeals and shrieks were less than six inches from her ear—guaranteed hearing loss.

She glanced at Tori whose smile split her face, ear to ear. But... fuck, the woman was tearing up. She lifted a warning finger in her direction while trying to contain her sister’s gleeful hug with her other arm. “No. Absolutely no crying, Tori.”

Tori laughed and wiped at her eyes. “Right, I’ll try. Let’s see the ring!” She bounced out of the chair and reached across the table to hold Jade’s hand.

That comment caught Jewell’s attention, and she finally released the death grip she had on Jade’s neck.

Tori sighed, “A princess-cut diamond. What is the other stone? A fire opal?”

“Yeah.” Two baguette-cut opals flanked the diamond. Nic had told her it was because he saw her strength and fire in those stones, not that she’d ever tell anyone that bit of information.

Tori’s eyes welled with tears again. “It is beautiful! When did Nic propose?”

Jewell grabbed her hand and examined the ring.

“Two weeks—”

“What!” The word echoed around the room.

“Wow, impressive. You two did that in unison.” Jade was seriously in awe of their synchronization.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Jewell’s eyes darted between the ring and Jade.

Dammit, she knew there might be hurt feelings, but seriously, it was... fuck, it was hard. “Look, you know me. I don’t do this froo-froo shit, but I was going to try. I was all about letting Mom know and hoping she’d help me do all the planning for the wedding, right?”

Tori’s brow furrowed, but she nodded. Jewell just cast her a suspicious look.

“Well, I called her the next morning because, you know, I was kinda busy with Nic the night before.” Jewell and Tori snickered but sobered immediately when she frowned at them. “Anyway, I was going to tell her, but she launched into this happy gush of words about all the work she was doing to prepare for the entire family coming to the ranch for Christmas. It’s the first time in what, God, I don’t know how many years, that we’ve all been home at the same time. She’s excited, and she’s neck deep in all things Christmas. Food, cleaning, buying gifts, assigning rooms, finding things for the grandchildren to do so they don’t drive everyone batshit.” She glanced at Tori. “No offense.”

Tori laughed. “None taken. The boys can be a bit much.”

“Nah, your kids are awesome... as long as I can give them back to you when they start whining.” Jade shrugged. It was the truth. Talon was cool as shit, and so was Reece, but they were older. The smaller ones? They scared the fuck out of her. And babies? Nope... she’d end up breaking them.

“So, you *didn’t* tell her?” Jewell sat on the conference room table beside Jade.

“No, and the reason I didn’t was because I had probably the most stupid idea of all stupid ideas. Ever.” She drew a deep breath and shook her head. “I know it is almost impossible for everyone to be at the same place at the same time. I mean when Nic and I were home just before Thanksgiving, Mom

moaned about how Thanksgiving almost didn't come off because of the scheduling conflicts between the few of us that were able to come. Thinking about how to pull off a wedding where everyone could be there? Shit, the details damn near drove me to drink. But then I thought, why not Christmas at the ranch? Everyone is going to be at the ranch anyway, well, except for maybe Dixon, Chief, and Taty."

"Girl, like you need a reason to drink." Jewell taunted.

Jade flipped her off, and Jewell stuck out her tongue. It was orange from the candy she'd just eaten.

"Anyway, I thought we could get married on Christmas Eve and have it as a surprise for Mom, kinda like an early Christmas present." Jade grimaced when she saw her sister's expression change from interest to disbelief.

"Three weeks? You want to get married in three weeks?" Jewell stood up and leaned against the table staring at her sister. Her hands hit the wood, and her fingers moved to mimic typing strokes. She shook her head. "Do you realize how long it took to plan my wedding? The logistics of a ceremony are mind-boggling. To start with, do you have a venue—"

"Jewell," Tori interrupted. "Maybe we should hear what type of wedding Jade wants. That would probably assist us in knowing whether or not she's bitten off more than we can chew."

"Thank you." Jade sat down and tapped the folder in front of her. "I've been doing research and calling around. I talked to Reverend Miller at Mom and Frank's church. He wasn't too keen on doing the wedding on Christmas and suggested we do a ceremony in the early afternoon the day before Christmas. He asked that the flowers remain in the sanctuary and be in liturgical colors for the season."

"Liturgical colors?" Jewell mumbled the question around another piece of candy.

"Colors appropriate for the Feast of Christmas. White and gold, but red's okay, too. I guess poinsettias or roses and such. I can deal with those colors." Hell, Jade loved the idea. "We

have to do video counseling with him before the wedding. Evidently, that's a church requirement. We've already scheduled that. If you take out the calendar..." She watched Jewell and Tori flip through their folders. "Yes, there it is. You'll see I have those appointments already written in."

"In pen, on a copied, fill-in-the-date calendar?" Jewell sat up straight and shook her head. "This is going to go digital about sixty seconds after this meeting is over."

Jade leaned forward and rubbed her temples. "I don't care, Jewell. The point is, I need help."

"What do you need?" Tori pulled a piece of paper from the folder, scanned it and flipped it over. She then reached over and plucked a pencil out of Jewell's hair.

"I need flowers. Obviously, because I told the preacher I would do it. I can't find a florist within a hundred miles of Hollister."

Victoria tapped the table with the eraser of her commandeered pencil as she thought. "It's been a couple years, but I think—no, I know—Keelee hired a florist from Rapid City to do the arrangements and went down the day before to pick them up. I bet she could work something out for you." Tori circled the flower arrangements. "But that would mean I'd need to tell her. I know she can keep her mouth shut. The woman is about as stoic as they come."

Jade groaned and flopped back into the chair. "I really didn't want to let anyone else in on this."

Tori glanced up from the paper Jade had put together. "She'd be able to take care of it, and you could mark it off your list."

"Fine, but you call her, and you make her swear she won't say a thing to Mom, or anyone else for that matter."

"Deal. She'll keep it to herself." Tori scratched something onto her paper. "So, any combination of red and white?"

"Yeah, but I don't want a big thing to carry down the aisle. Something small, okay?"

“That leads to the question of your dress.” Jewell grabbed a pencil from behind her ear and flipped over a piece of paper from the file. “You’ve got that taken care of?”

“I found an online boutique. I don’t want a gown. Since there isn’t time for the dresses to be handmade, I figured we can order cocktail dresses. I have the color I picked out for the bridesmaid dresses annotated next to the link. There are three different styles for the dresses. I’ve put the item numbers beside the color. I don’t care which ones you pick, just make sure you have that color, and we’re solid.”

Tori’s head popped up. “You want me as a bridesmaid?”

Jade frowned in confusion. “Well, yeah.”

“Oh.” Tears built in Tori’s eyes again.

“Nooo... you don’t get to do that. I don’t do tears. They are not authorized. Copy?” Jade pointed at her sister-in-law. Tori was totally overboard with the emotions. “I want to keep the bridesmaids to just you two.”

“Well, that’s going to cause a stink.” Jewell sat with her pencil suspended in air.

“Why?” Jade could see the metaphoric tide rising.

The pencil in Jewell’s hand leveled and pointed at her. “Your twin?”

And it begins. “She and Chad eloped. None of us were there. How could she be upset?” Jade stared wide-eyed at Jewell.

“You’re not eloping. They had their reasons for doing that,” Tori interjected, bringing Jade’s attention to her.

“What reasons?” Jade couldn’t think of any. At least *she* was getting married when everyone was around. *Maybe. It was still up in the air.*

“Paparazzi and pregnancy.” Jewell grabbed another candy and pulled the wrapper away as she spoke. “You know you have to ask Jasmine. Stop being hard-headed.”

Jade could see her idea of a small, quiet ceremony starting to wither and die, but Jewell was right. She hadn't considered Jasmine's feelings. "Oh. Dammit. Okay, the three of you."

"What about Faith?" Tori asked. "If you ask me, you almost have to include her."

Jade dropped her head to the wood table. *Ow*. A resounding thud echoed in the large room, or at least through her skull. She lifted away from the table, defeated. "Can she keep this from Reece? That kid tells Mom everything."

"I can talk to her." Tori jotted down a note. "I'm sure she can."

Jewell lifted a finger. "But if you ask Faith, what about..."

"Ember." All three of them spoke at the same time. "Okay, but no more."

"Dani." Jewell countered.

Jade shook her head. "Uh... no, she isn't married to Justin."

"Yet." Both of the women across the table spoke in unison.

"Dammit!" Jade let her head fall to the conference room table again. She picked it up and dropped it. Harder. "How many is that?" She'd lost count.

Tori tapped her pencil next to each name. "Six."

Her head popped up, and she blinked her sister-in-law back into vision. "Six, including me?"

Tori laughed, "No, you make seven."

This *was* a bad idea. Her head hit the table again. "Never mind, I'll elope."

"You don't need to do that. The women in this family are more than capable of keeping this quiet. We all love Amanda, and organizing this so she doesn't have to stress? It's child's play. You are doing a good thing here, Jade. We are inventive, resourceful and determined." Tori's voice sounded resolute.

“Correct. We can do this.” Jewell agreed. “Who are the groomsmen?”

Jade lifted up from the table. “Right, Nic was going to ask his younger brother, Mario, and Jared to stand up with him, but Mario is spending Christmas with Carmine, Nic’s older brother. He’d already committed to it, and if he backs out, Carmine will have more shit to hold against Nic. So, Nic decided to ask Jacob. Now he needs to find four more guys for the detail.”

“Easy, I bet I can guess two more, Jason and Christian.” Jewell lifted a finger each time she listed a name. “And Chad, Justin or Joseph, maybe?”

Jade crossed her eyes. “I’ll let him decide who will be the groomsmen.” Nic could deal with that shit.

“Good idea, but we’ll have to stay on top of it.” Jewell scribbled something down.

“So, we’re wearing cocktail dresses? I think that is a great idea since it will be an afternoon affair.”

Tori’s comment helped elevate her belief she hadn’t fucked up the entire event. “Yes, cocktail dresses for us, and Nic and I decided black suits for the men. White shirt and ties that match our dresses. I’ll order those tonight. I guess I’ll send them to Jasmine’s place?”

“Logical staging location. That house they built is huge. Jazz can hide everything away. I’ll talk to her tomorrow, which means you need to call her as soon as we finish here.” Jewell wrote as she talked.

“Perfect. I can talk to Keelee, who will clue in Ember.” Tori chuckled, “Those two are as thick as thieves.”

Jade shook her head. “I should call Ember and Keelee. I’ll do that after I call Jasmine. Or maybe I’ll do it all at the same time... conference call... I’ll figure it out.”

“I can help you with that. Is this the color you want us to order the dresses in? JB78K5?” Jade pointed to the number code the online bridal shop had given her for the deep rose-red she liked.

“Right. That is the exact color I want. The minute I saw it, I knew it was perfect.” Jade smiled. She could do this. She enjoyed the realization that she was semi in control of the situation again. “What’s next?”

“Food and alcohol for the reception. I know Mom and Aunt Betty usually make a big Christmas Eve dinner, so you don’t need to worry about that, but people are going to want to drink, toast you and...”

Jewell and Tori looked at each other before staring back at Jade. She sat up and looked at the folder in front of her. “What? What did I miss?”

Jewell pointed to the paper where Tori had written the word reception. “Cake. Yours and the groom’s.”

“Wait a minute. That’s bullshit. Two cakes? Who has two cakes at a wedding?” She pointed at Jewell. “You didn’t!” Jade knew when her chain was getting jerked.

“Ummm... just about everyone knows you have two cakes. We had a dessert bar instead because... hello, it was me, but you could have just the one. It’s old school, but doable.” Jewell looked at Victoria who shrugged in agreement.

Jade gaped at Jewell and turned her stare to Victoria.

The woman held up her hands in surrender. “Don’t look at me, I got married in front of a judge wearing Jasmine’s clothes. I’m winging this shit based on Keelee’s and Jewell’s weddings.”

“Right. We can ask Keelee who she used for the cake.” Jewell scratched a note to herself.

“I hope it wasn’t Aunt Betty, because that woman couldn’t keep a secret to save herself.” Tori made a note on the paper.

Jade sat up straighter and peeked at the extensive writing on both Tori and Jewell’s sheets. Okay, maybe she’d made the right decision when she’d asked for help. Thank God.

“What about Justin?”

“Justin?” Jade had no idea what she’d missed.

“He has like a hundred restaurants. His pastry chefs catered our wedding. If Keelee doesn’t have a source, we could ask him for help.”

“Okay. You know we are going to need to put this into a spreadsheet.” Jewell looked at Tori.

“Definitely. Tabs for each function and who is responsible for what aspect. We can share the sheet between us, that way when an item is finished we’ll all see it.” Tori shuffled the papers in front of her together.

Jewell nodded. “Perfect. I’ll sync it with an event calendar so we can send reminders and have contact information in one place for all vendors.”

Jade drew her fingers to the sides of her mouth and let out a whistle. The women on the other side of the table jumped. At least she had their attention now. “Good. Thank you, ladies, you are making all of this bearable, *but* I don’t want you to do anything until I talk to Nic. No phone calls to anyone, no databases, no calendars, no orders, no *syncing*... nothing. Are we clear?” She had to make sure her fiancé was cool with what was turning out to be one hell of a big event. Maybe they should elope. That was still an option because Tori and Jewell had sworn to keep the whole thing a secret.

Tori smiled. “We are clear. I know it seems like a lot of moving pieces and parts, but we can do this and keep it as a surprise for Amanda.”

“Wait, what about Mom’s dress?”

Jade felt her eyes roll into the back of her head. “That’s a thing?” Jewell snorted and tossed her a look. Jade grimaced. “Let me talk to Nic. Can we get together tomorrow?”

“Sure, the afternoon is best for me.” Tori shuffled her papers into the folder.

“Perfect. That will give me time to...” Jewell shoved the papers into the folder and glanced at Jade. “... wake up.”

“You’re not fooling me. At least don’t share those damn documents until I say we are good to go.” She knew her sister.

If she had a project, she'd work day and night to make it perfect. It made her one of the best tech nerds in the world.

The woman's smile lit up her face. "Coolio. I'm heading home."

"No telling Zane or Jacob." Jade reminded the women as they got up to leave.

"Our lips are sealed."

Jewell laughed at Tori's comment.

Jade dropped her head to the table again and groaned, "Oh, fuck. That hurt."

CHAPTER 2

Victoria Marshall entered the front door to her home to the sounds of laughter. A happy contented smile spread across her face.

“Momma!” Trace barreled down the long hallway and jumped up. Tori grabbed him in midair and braced against the little guy’s weight. “Hey, buddy. Where’s Daddy?”

Trace pointed toward the family room. “I’m hungry. When’s dinner?”

Tori laughed at her little bottomless pit. “Soon. Didn’t Daddy give you a snack?”

“I did, and he ate most of Tanner’s too.” Jacob swooped Trace out of her arms and tossed him into the air. Trace’s shrieks of laughter echoed through the hallway, bringing three more boys to the door.

“Momma!”

Tori dropped down so she could be smothered in hugs.

Jacob gave them a few seconds before he sat Trace down. “Okay, Talon, Tanner, Trace and Tristan, clean up time, then dinner. That means put away the toys and wash your hands. Inspection in ten minutes!”

A chorus of disgruntled hemming and hawing followed the boys down the hall, but they went. Jacob watched them until they disappeared into the family room before he snagged Tori’s waist and pulled her against him. “Welcome home.” His lips descended on hers, and she sighed into his embrace. She

shivered when his fingers skimmed the bottom of her silk shirt and lifted it, sliding his warm fingers along the waistband of her skirt. Jacob noticed and smiled into their kiss before he pulled away. “Somebody needs me.”

Tori reached up and caressed his cheek while she stared into his beautiful green eyes. Those sinfully long lashes enthralled her just as much today as they had years ago. “I do. I’ll always need you.”

A shriek of laughter pulled them apart a few inches. Jacob glanced over his shoulder toward where his sons had gone. “That *does not* sound like cleaning up to me!”

Another bout of laughter echoed down the hall.

“They are terrified of you.”

Jacob tried to hide the smile that tugged at his lips. “Damn straight. I’m the enforcer of the family.”

“You’re not. You’re my fifth child.” She winked at him as she headed down the hall. She stalled in the family room doorway and put her hands on her hips. Talon saw her and tapped Tanner, who tapped Trace. “Tristan, honey, the blocks go in the basket, not over your head. Boys, help him, don’t encourage him.” Tristan twisted to look at her and smiled the exact smile Jacob used when he tried to appear innocent. “I’m watching you, mister.” She pointed at him and then threw the room a kiss. The boys grabbed at the kiss and disintegrated into giggles again.

Jacob put his arms around her as they watched the boys make a light-hearted attempt at picking up the toys strewn around the room. He whispered in her ear, “Jade better have a good reason for pulling you away from family time. These moments are too damn rare.”

Victoria leaned back into him. “It was a damn good reason.”

“Wow, cursing within fifty feet of the kids. What did she need help with? I haven’t seen any mission briefs from the Dom Ops side lately, been too busy working overseas leads on

Stratus.” He nuzzled her neck. The scratch of his five o’clock shadow sent another shiver through her.

Tori sighed, “I’m not at liberty to say.”

Jacob straightened and turned her in his arms. The boys’ laughter from the family room surrounded them. “Is she okay?”

Tori nodded. “She’ll be fine. She just needed help coming to grips with something. Something between her and Nic.”

Jacob blinked at her, tossed a quick glance at the boys and then focused on her again with obvious interest. “No. Really? Her and Nic?”

Victoria held up a finger and narrowed her gaze to slits. “Jacob, I swore I wouldn’t say a word to you. You *cannot* say anything. Period. If she finds out you guessed, she’ll never trust me again.”

“When are they going to announce it?” Jacob flashed a glance at the boys. “Talon, help Tanner with that cubby, please.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

Jacob’s eyes followed the boys for a moment before he dropped his attention to her again.

“I don’t think they want anyone to know.” Tori grabbed his arms and broke his hold on her waist but tugged him down the hall to the kitchen. The aroma of the roast she had waiting in the slow cooker hit her hard. It was mouthwatering. “Did you put the potatoes in the oven?”

“Roger that.” Jacob grabbed a handful of almonds out of the bowl on the counter and popped a few into his mouth. “When is she due?”

Victoria dropped the spoon she was taking out of the drawer. “Due? Wait you think... Jade’s... pregnant?” Tori could not wrap her mind around that concept. Oh, that would be a major event with an ‘all-hands-on-deck’ call to every woman in the family, in-laws, outlaws, friends, relatives of

friends. It would take a village to get Jade through a pregnancy and the first six months postpartum.

“Aunt Jade’s having a baby?” Talon stood at the doorway.

“No, sweetie, I guarantee Aunt Jade isn’t having a baby.”

“That’s what Dad said.” Talon pointed at his father.

“That was an adult conversation, mister. I obviously got something messed up. There is a first time for everything.”

Talon blinked at his father. “What did you get messed up?”

“Something your mommy told me. Now, are you done cleaning up?”

Jacob’s diversionary tactics seemed to work because Talon nodded. “I need the step stool for Tristan.”

Jacob nodded to the plastic step. “Make sure he uses soap. That goes for the rest of you, too.”

Talon walked out of the kitchen and yelled over his shoulder, “We know... geesh, Dad.”

Jacob’s head snapped to Tori. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “She’s not preggers?”

Tori glared at him. “Seriously, what are you? Twelve?”

Jacob waggled his eyebrows. “We both know I’m older than that. So, she’s not?”

“Jade pregnant? That would be a *no*.”

“Then what is going on between her and Nic?” He snapped his eyes toward the door before he hissed, “Fuck me, did they break up?” Jacob immediately dropped his head back and stared at the ceiling. “That is going to be a fucking mess.”

Tori marched over to him and hit him in the chest.

“Ouch!” Jacob rubbed where she’d slapped him. “What did *I* do?”

Tori glanced at the doorway and angrily whispered, “I didn’t tell you this, and you can’t say a word. *To anyone*.”

Jacob lifted his fingers in a Boy Scout salute. “On my honor.”

Tori glared at him. “They’re engaged. ” He straightened, and she clapped her hand over his mouth to stop whatever he was going to say. “She wants to surprise your mom and have the wedding on Christmas Eve afternoon. Everyone will already be there. Jewell and I are helping her do that.” Jacob’s eyebrows reached toward the ceiling. She could read the emotion flashing across his face like it was written in red crayon. “You got yourself under control?”

Jacob nodded. Her hand rose up and down with his head.

“And you swear not to say a thing to another living soul.”

Again, his head, with her hand still covering his mouth, went north and south.

“Promise me.”

Jacob mumbled under her hand. “I promise.”

Tori dropped her hand and smiled. “A heck of a Christmas surprise for Grandma, huh?”


Jacob laughed and pulled her into his embrace. “If Jade can pull this off, it may be the best Christmas gift ever.”

“Well, if Jewell and I have anything to say about it, it will be amazing.”

Jacob dropped a long, slow, wonderful kiss on her lips before he sighed, “Anything you do is amazing.”

“You are only saying that so I’ll do *you*.” Tori bit her bottom lip and looked through her lashes at the man she adored. “Early bedtime tonight for the boys?”

“You read my mind.” Jacob dropped his lips to hers.

“ Are you done with whatever it is that you’re doing?” Zane looked over the top of the couch. “Didn’t you want to watch this?” He pointed toward the television.

Jewell lifted her eyes to the screen and nodded. “Yeah, just give me like two more minutes.” She was almost done. She’d taken her wedding planning software and copied it, shortening the timeline by seven months and deleted the majority of the ‘fluff’ that had made her and Zane’s wedding an event they’d never forget. She entered the link for the dress store and typed in the color code. She needed to get on the site and order a dress, but that could wait until after she spent some quality time with her husband. Lately, having him home was a rare event. He spent so much time at the compound in South Dakota and the one they were building in Arizona that they tended to guard their alone time. Especially with everything that was happening.

“What are you working on?” Zane’s voice from over her shoulder made her jump. His hands on her shoulders settled her, but her heart still pounded against her chest. “Where were you? Lost in thought?”

“Yep. I was down a rabbit hole, that’s for sure.” She laughed and reached to minimize the screen.

“Wait, why are you in our wedding program?” Zane knelt down behind her chair and looked at the document on the screen. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

Jewell turned toward him. “You can’t say a word. Jade asked Tori and me for help.”

Zane swung his eyes from the document to her. “No problem, babe, but I think you need to change the date.”

Jewell glanced at the document. “No, I got it right.”

Zane looked back at the sheet and grabbed her mouse. He highlighted the year. “Shouldn’t that be next year?”

“If we were dealing with a normal woman, yes.”

“Holy Fuck, no way.”

“Yeah, way. Now you know why she called Tori and me in on a Saturday.”

“Who else is helping?” Zane scrolled through the multitude of tasks that remained unfinished.

“Right now? No one. She wanted to do this as a surprise gift for Mom. When Tori and I started identifying some of the things she didn’t think of, she kind of had a meltdown. She wants to talk to Nic before we go farther, but you know.” She reached out and opened the file Jade had given her.

“You couldn’t wait to make that mess functional and digital.” Zane smiled at her.

“Bingo.” She glanced at the tab that was open. “The ring he gave her was beautiful. I’ve never seen firestone opals on an engagement ring before.”

“No diamond?”

“Oh, hell yes, there was a rock included. It was beautiful, but nowhere close to mine.” She leaned over and kissed Zane. “I have the best husband in the world.”

“I love you, too. Now, put this to bed. You’re supposed to be resting today.” Zane stood and used his big hands to rub her shoulders.

“Oh, gawd, that is *faaabuuulous*.” Jewell let her head loll as Zane continued to minister wonderful pressure to her sore muscles.

“You promised to slow down.” Zane dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

Jewell tipped her head back and gazed up at him. “I am. This is fun, and it is for family. The work stuff stays at work these days.”

“Caffeine?” He lifted an eyebrow.

“Ha! I had three cups of coffee today. No energy drinks, no soda.” She stuck her tongue out at him. He spun her chair around and reached down, scooping her out. She squealed and wrapped her legs and arms around him. He carried her to the couch and sat down. She moved so she was straddling his lap. “And yes, while you were gone, I’ve eaten breakfast, lunch and dinner, every day. Lunch and dinner had veggies and breakfast had fruit.”

Zane pulled two pencils from her hair and tipped them into an ornate cup on the end table that he'd put there for that purpose. "Anubis has the helm at the ranch now. I still have the Arizona project, but unless shit goes downhill fast, I should be able to limit my trips out of town. Dixon and Drake were originally supposed to oversee the construction of the Shadow Facility in Arizona, but..."

Jewell snorted. "Yeah, that went to hell in a handbasket."

He made an affirmative sound, agreeing with her before his hands wandered up the inside of his massive hoodie. "I worry about you when I'm not here."

"Right back at you, darling." She reached up and traced a faint scar on his cheek. "Want you." She ground down against him, and he groaned. Zane tipped her to the side, and she shrieked out a laugh as he pounced on her. She grabbed him behind the neck and pulled him down. "Come here, tiger."

CHAPTER 3

Juggling take-out bags in one hand, along with the mail and her satchel, Jade jammed the key into the lock and jiggled it around until she could get the tumblers to turn. The second she opened the door, the alarm started to chirp. She kicked the door shut, threw the deadbolt, spun, dropped her keys into the tray on the table, and silenced the alarm.

“Honey! I’m home!” She kicked out of her shoes and dropped her satchel and the mail. Food was a necessity, and she was taking it with her. The rest of the shit could wait.

“In the den.” Nic’s reply came from the back of the house.

“Be right there. Water or beer?” She made her way into the state-of-the-art kitchen while mumbling, “Or something a fuck-ton harder?” She glanced at the pristine kitchen with granite counters, an island that looked like it was made to seat twenty, and the industrial-sized appliances. The kitchen was used as little as humanly possible. Her usage consisted of making coffee and heating leftovers, but Nic was slowly teaching her how to make his mother’s recipes. She wasn’t a cook. Hell, they’d laughed until they’d cried when the pasta she tried to make became jammed in the pasta maker’s guts, killing the machine. She mumbled under her breath, “I vote for something harder. Whiskey, bourbon, scotch.” Jade cocked her head in consideration. “Vodka, rum, a combination of all of the above?”

Nic sounded like he was distracted when he answered. “Beer unless you’re drinking hard liquor, then water and two

tumblers.”

“You know me so well!” She shouted back as she grabbed two bottles of water and carefully dropped them into one of the takeout bags. It was the work of five seconds to snatch two crystal tumblers as she headed toward the den.

His prosthesis off and propped against the wall next to him and his crutches within reach, Nic sprawled on the chaise lounge portion of the couch..

“How did it go?” He looked up as she came in.

Jade held up two tumblers as her answer. Nic grimaced. “That bad?”

“Well, it was, and it wasn’t.” The food landed on the table with a thud, and she left Nic to lift the closest portion of the convertible oak and chrome table toward the sofa. It was one of the best investments they’d made since Nic had lost his leg. The hinged system extended half the table, angling it up and over, perfectly aligning the surface to the sofa. They ate most of their meals in the den, watching television or relaxing. Unless they had company, the huge dining room sat vacant.

She cast a glance at what was available at their bar. Jade snagged the bright red waxed top of a bottle of Maker’s Mark, bringing it to the table. Nic positioned himself on the couch so he could arrange the takeout containers. She sat down and uncorked the bottle, pouring them both a generous three-finger allowance.

Nic glanced at the amount of alcohol in each glass. “By the looks of that pour, I’d say more was than wasn’t.”

Jade took a healthy sip of the bourbon. The burn and flavor as it slid down her throat instantly took the irritated edge off her attitude. “Well, it was an experience.” She opened several of the take-out containers until she found the eggrolls. Grabbing one she passed the container to Nic. “We have a couple problems.”

“I figured this wasn’t going to be an easy operation.” Nic tore open a sweet and sour packet and doused his eggroll with the stuff. Jade wrinkled her nose at him when he offered some

to her. Nic laughed and squirted the rest of the packet straight into his mouth.

“That is so gross.” Jade took a bite of her food.

“Says the woman who likes blue cheese.” He glanced over at the containers and moved the fried rice closer to both of them. He handed her the General Tso’s chicken and took the cashew chicken for himself.

“Blue cheese rocks.” She grabbed a packet of soy sauce and poured it over his rice before doing the same to hers with another packet. “Tori and Jewell pointed out I needed to include Jasmine as a bridesmaid.”

Nic hit his thigh with his free hand. “Ha! Told you.”

“You can wipe that smirk off your face, right now.” Jade pointed at him with her chopsticks.”

“Not happening. I was right. Stop the presses. We need to record the date and time of this event.” Nic chortled when she flipped him off.

Jade tilted the container and considered the contents before she picked out a piece of chicken. “I still don’t see why. I mean, she eloped.”

“She’s your twin sister.” Nic shrugged as if that was enough of an answer. Jade would never admit it was, but it... well it *was*. Dammit. “So, we have one more attendant. Still small. Doable.”

Jade snorted, and Nic paused with a bite of rice halfway to his mouth. “What?”

“It was also pointed out that if I invite Tori to be an attendant, I had to invite Faith.” She looked at Nic who was watching her like he was waiting for the other shoe to drop. “If I invite Faith, by extension I need to invite Ember and Dani.”

“Dani? She’s not married to Justin.” Nic’s confusion showed as clearly as hers had this morning.

“Yet.” Jade stabbed another piece of chicken. “I can see their point, but that is six women which means you need to find four more groomsmen.”

Nic put his rice down and leaned back against the couch. “This is starting to mushroom.”

“Which is why I told them to stop everything until I could talk to you.” Jade put the food down and picked up both tumblers. She handed Nic his and scooted back, fitting herself into the crook of his arm. “I mean, I get what they’re saying, but what is blowing my fucking mind is how fast it morphed. I showed them the ring and then—boom! Twelve people up there in front of Father Clark, not counting us. Then they talked cake. Did you know there is a bride *and* groom cake?”

“Yeah, sure,” Nic answered as he took a drink of his bourbon.

“Well, I didn’t. Why can’t we just have one cake?” Jade took another slug of her drink. The burn of the alcohol trailing down her throat wasn’t there anymore. A pleasant warmth lingered in its place.

“That’s fine with me. Did they think we could still pull this off as a surprise for Amanda if we go with six attendants each?” Nic scratched his chin. He hadn’t shaved today, and his stubble was thick and dark.

“Tori seemed pretty confident. I need to call the ladies at the ranch. I’ll talk with Dani and Faith on Monday. They suggested using Jazz’s ranch to stage anything we need to ship out.”

Nic grunted and took another drink. “What about the flower situation? I know it was giving you a migraine yesterday.”

“Tori said Keelee used a florist in Rapid City. So, we’d have to drive down the day before and pick up the arrangements. That’s doable, right?”

Nic nodded while staring into his bourbon, “I’m sure with all of us there someone can free up and go down to Rapid without Amanda noticing one of her chicks missing.”

Jade rolled her head into his chest and sighed. Nic pulled her in closer. “Babe, we don’t have to do this.”

Jade nodded. “Yeah, but...”

“But you want to get married in South Dakota, and you’d love to surprise your mom.”

Jade sighed and nodded. “It’s stupid, isn’t it?”

“No, not at all. If I could still do that for my mom, I would in a heartbeat. You do whatever it takes, babe. You are a force of nature. Just tell me what I need to do, and I’ll make it happen. The trappings of this wedding aren’t what’s important. As long as I have you with me standing in front of that altar, I’m a happy man. Take charge of this thing and wrangle it into submission. I’ve got your back.”

Jade chuckled. “You know me so well.”

“I’ve scratched the surface. I think it may take fifty or sixty years to understand what makes you tick.”

She tipped her head up so she could see him looking down at her. “Wanna know a secret?”

Nic’s eyebrows crept up, and a smile spread across his face. “Absolutely.”

“*You* are what makes me tick.” Jade leaned forward and put her drink on the table. She took Nic’s and deposited it beside hers.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Nic’s smirk bordered on lecherous.

Jade nodded gravely. “Starving.” She flipped the lever that dropped the table’s extended leaf back into place and shimmied to the floor between Nic’s thighs. Her hands slid up his jeans to his growing bulge. “I’m absolutely famished.”

CHAPTER 4

“*W*hy does Jewell want us here again?” Ember put the SUV into park and turned off the ignition.

“The only thing she told me was that it was a Christmas surprise for Amanda and we needed to help.” Keelee unhooked her seatbelt and glanced through the windshield toward the front porch of Jasmine and Chad’s ranch house. “I love her Christmas lights! I wonder if Chad got up on a ladder to do the second and third floor?”

Ember glanced out the windshield. Snowflakes landed and melted on the warm glass. “It is beautiful. Joseph’s doing ours today.”

“Adam, Kaeden, Isaac and Drake are joining forces to do lights on all our houses.” She put her hood up and sighed. “Joseph could have...” She glanced at Ember, and they both started laughing. “Never mind. Joseph doesn’t play well with others.”

A sense of intense warmth and love flooded Ember’s heart. “He only plays well with me.” She glanced at Keelee who smiled softly at her. Their friendship had endured years and become stronger when they helped each other navigate troubled waters.

“You two were made for each other.” Keelee nodded to the porch. Jasmine had opened the door and wrapped her arms around herself trying to block out the bitter cold. “Come on, before she catches pneumonia.”

Ember grabbed the keys and opened the SUV door. “Oh, damn!” She slammed the door and sprinted to the warm orange glow of the open doorway and promise of warmth.

When they reached the foyer, Jasmine waved them in and shut the door behind them. “I have wine set up in my office. For some reason, I have a feeling we’re going to need it.”

Ember shrugged out of her down-filled coat and hung it on a beautifully carved hall tree that was made out of a... well, tree. It was huge but fit the grand entryway of the home. “Why, what did Jewell tell you?” She rubbed her arms out of instinct although the warmth of the house was starting to penetrate the bone-chilling cold of the South Dakota evening.

“That Jade needed help and something about Christmas. She left a voice message and hasn’t picked up my repeated calls. Neither has Jade, but that’s par for course. When Jade gets involved with something, all bets are off.”

Keelee stopped short alongside her. “Jade?” They both asked.

“So it seems. Come on, wine and snacks while we wait to get our mission brief.” Jasmine turned and headed to her office. Ember and Keelee were no strangers to the home and knew the way. The beauty of the home still amazed her. Jazz’s office was expansive with a large stone fireplace. The mantle was made from pine harvested on Jasmine and Chad’s ranch. The corner of the room boasted a wet bar with delicate feminine accents of hand-carved fleur de lis and magnolia blossoms. Over a long low carved cabinet, they’d hung a seventy-inch flat screen. The office wasn’t much of an office. It was more like a family living room if you discounted a desk and computer off to one side. The warm dark jewel tones, silk, and faux fur pillows and throws, soft high-pile carpet and comfortable furniture made the room so inviting Em would never consider it a workplace. This is the room they gathered in for Winchester Wednesday when it was Jazz’s turn to host.

“You don’t think she can’t come, do you? Amanda is so excited to have everyone home this year,” Keelee asked as she made a beeline for the wine. She lifted the open bottle and

poured three glasses without asking Em or Jazz if they wanted any. It was what any of them would do in each other's home.

"God, I hope not. Mom was here yesterday. With all this snow, we are going to have a toboggan race for the kids." Jasmine motioned out the window to a large hill that the kids loved to slide down. "We were brainstorming ideas and prizes."

Em snorted, "I'd recommend bourbon."

"For the kids?" Keelee gawked at her.

"Hell, no. For the men. You know the second they find out there is a competition they will end up challenging each other. Maybe hot toddies?" She glanced at Jasmine.

Jazz laughed and nodded. "Noted. I'll make sure the bar is well stocked."

The soft jingle of the telephone at Jazz's desk turned all three heads. "Well, this is it." Jazz nodded toward the desk, and they all settled around the dark mahogany escritoire. It was too beautiful to be called a desk. Jazz pushed two buttons and answered the phone on speaker.

"Hey, Jewell."

"Hey! Is everyone there?" From the sound of her voice, Jewell was obviously eating something.

"Ember, Keelee and I are here. What is going on with Jade?" Jasmine glanced across the expansive wood top at them.

"Okay, Jade is here and so is Tori. I'm stepping back and letting Jade tell you the situation."

"Hey. Thanks for this. I needed to talk to each of you, and... shit to be honest I really didn't want to have to say it over and over again, so I'm consolidating. I'll talk to Faith and Dani after we hang up."

Ember sat straight in her chair. "Jade, are you sick?"

"What?" Jade's voice cracked through the speaker. "Hell no. I'm fucking engaged." Ember blinked at the speaker then

at Jasmine and Keelee. All three women looked at each other in stunned silence. “Hello? Jewell, is this thing broken?” Jade’s question broke the momentary paralysis that gripped all three women.

“Well, it is about damn time!” Jasmine flew back against her chair and clapped her hands gleefully. “Congratulations! Have you told Mom? Set a date? God, send me a picture of the ring!”

Em and Keelee added their congratulations and chuckled at Jasmine’s happy dance in her chair.

“Okay, hold the door for just a minute. First, Mom does not know, and I forbid *anyone* to tell her.”

Jazz’s forehead furrowed, and she sat up, looking at the phone. “Why?” Her question held a healthy measure of suspicion.

“That’s the reason for the call. I want to surprise her and I need your help.” Jade explained.

“What, like a Christmas present?” Em was piecing together the conversation, or she hoped like hell she was.

“I want to get married the day before Christmas in the afternoon at Mom and Frank’s church in Hollister, and I want to do it without Mom knowing anything about it.”

“Shit.” Jasmine’s curse said it all.

“That’s less than three weeks!” Keelee leaned forward. “How... “

Jewell interrupted. “Ladies, before you have the same freak-out that Tori and I had, we’ve started a timeline with tasks identified.”

“Right.” That was Tori’s voice. “Keelee, I need you to get with the florist you used in Rapid...”

Jasmine hit the button to hang up the phone and gazed across her desk at Keelee. Ember stood, went to the bar,

and picked up the wine bottle. She poured them another full glass of wine and sat down.

“Can I just say, if we pull this off it will be a miracle?” Ember mumbled into her glass.

Keelee nodded. “It’s Sunday. I can’t get with the florist until tomorrow.” She took a healthy swig of wine. “They needed a minimum of three months lead time for my wedding.”

Jasmine turned to her computer and pulled up the email Jewell had sent to all of them. She opened the spreadsheet. “Here are the dresses.” She clicked on the link. “Oh, they are pretty.” She clicked on the shipping and nodded. “We need to order them tomorrow to make sure they get delivered in time, especially with the delays during the holiday. The delivery will be coming here, not into the complex, so that eliminates Guardian having to fly them in. Thank God for small miracles.”

“Jade said all the dresses were going to be sent here? I hope no one needs alterations.” Em eyed the three selections of dresses suspiciously. She had been blessed with curves, a lot of curves. The pencil skirt was out. The A-line would make her look like the Hulk, but the third one. The skirt would work... the top? She didn’t look great in a halter-top, because... big boobs but this wasn’t about her. She pointed at the dress she would order. “This one for me.”

Jasmine tapped the pencil skirt. “I’ll take that one. Okay, just to mark this off the list, let’s order them now.”

Em glanced down at the “to do” sheet. “Cake?”

“Betty did mine.” Keelee’s knee bounced hard for a moment until she sat straight up in her chair. “Sky can do it!”

“Sky Lang?” Jasmine shot a glance at Ember.

“Absolutely. She started making cakes for Kadey’s birthday parties when she couldn’t afford anything else. She is an amazing baker, and the things she can do with frosting are mind boggling. I can ask her!”

Em grimaced, “But, Jade said not to tell anyone else.”

Jasmine huffed a laugh and slapped the desk. “She wants this shit done and done in three weeks. If we have to make a few allowances to do it, then we make those allowances. Keelee, you talk to Sky. See if she’s willing to try, and ask what she’ll need. We can get everything from Rapid. Em, can you take the day tomorrow?”

“Um... I have clinic in the morning, but the schedule is light because training is on hold during the holidays...” She glanced at Keelee. “I can ask Adam to cover, he has a few souls in the hospital, but he doesn’t have clinic hours tomorrow.”

“Excellent. As soon as we can in the morning, let’s head down to Rapid City. We’ll go in person to the florist Keelee used and beg, borrow or steal the damn flowers.”

Em stopped the truck in her driveway after dropping off Keelee. She smiled at the beautiful star affixed to the chimney of the house. LED lights, draped like icicles, framed the front of the house, and a sign that indicated Santa should stop “here” was posted prominently in the snowbank that was their front yard. South Dakota had had more than their normal forty-two inches of snow that year. It was pretty, but she could have done with a little less of the winter wonderland. Large and small snowmen scaled the mounded snow on the other side of the walk. Her men had been busy.

She turned off the ignition and got out of the SUV still looking at the lights. “Beautiful.” Her breath frosted in the air.

“Yes, you are.”

Joseph stood in the door to the kitchen and she smiled with a shake of her head. She’d stopped jumping at his sudden appearances once she realized he was always near.

“I was talking about the lights.”

“I know.”

She smiled, and when he walked down the stairs and stood in front of her, she rose up on her toes to kiss him.

He kissed her again before he pointed to the door. “Get in before you freeze.” He grabbed the extension cord off the wall by the garage and plugged in the heating block of her SUV. It was absolutely necessary if she wanted to start the vehicle in sub-zero weather.

“Is Blake asleep?” She opened the door but waited for Joey to step in behind her. He shut the door as he slipped past her.

“He went with Mom and Frank to pick out a Christmas tree for their house.” Joey pulled her into a tight embrace. “Did you have a good time at Jasmine’s?”

Ember groaned and dropped her head back, so she could see him.

A single male eyebrow arched up. “What?”

She sighed. “Do you want the short version or the long one?”

“The one that explains the heavy sigh.” He folded her back into his chest, and she drew a deep breath.

“Jade threw us for a loop. That’s for sure.” Ember laughed when her husband made a growling noise in his chest. “I had so looked forward to this Christmas being a quiet, peaceful time.”

A sudden burst of baritone laughter vibrated in her ear. “You’ve met my sister, right?”

She chuckled too. “Yeah. I have.”

“What’s she up to now?” Joey released her from the hug and trailed his hand down her arm to her hand. He lifted it and kissed her palm while his eyes fixed on her.

God, the excitement of being the sole focus of a man this intense never got old. A shiver ran through her. “She’s engaged.”

Joey lifted his lips away from her palm. “And?”

“And she wants to get married on Christmas Eve, and she doesn’t want to let your mom know so Amanda doesn’t have

to stress the details.”

Joey smirked. “Instead she wants you, Jasmine and Keelee to stress the details.”

Em cocked her head. “Very astute. A wedding in three weeks is impossible.”

Joseph tugged her into the living room and sat down, pulling her on top of him. “Is it? Impossible?”

“No, not really, but it will be difficult to pull off.” She ran her fingers through his thick hair. The greys were sneaking in, but it was sexy on her man. “She didn’t want us to tell anyone.”

Joseph reached up and pulled the clasp out of her hair sending, the damn curls tumbling around her face. “You tell me everything.” He pulled her down, his eyes holding hers in an intense gaze.

“You’re my safe place.” She leaned down and dropped a soft kiss on his lips. “Besides, you’d never betray my confidence.” She ran her finger over his bottom lip and squeaked when he snapped at it. Oh, hell, it had been at least a month since they’d been able to play. Make love, sure, that happened almost every night, but play... she sighed and looked up at the clock. Her quick glance was enough for him to know what she was thinking.

“An hour before they said they’d be back.” His fist tightened in her hair, and he pulled her down to him. “You’ve got three minutes to get naked and meet me in the playroom.”

“She’s doing what?” Adam Cassidy dropped into his recliner and stared at his wife.

“Getting married in three weeks.” Keelee dropped in the chair with him and wiggled to settle on her hip next to him. “See?” She held up the phone and scrolled through the tabs of tasks that still hadn’t been done. “Em is going to ask you to take clinic in the morning so she can go to Rapid with Jasmine.”

Adam shrugged. “That’s fine.” He took her phone away from her and settled her against his chest. “What does she have you doing?”

“I got voluntold to find someone to make a cake. I’m going to ask Sky if she could do it. With only three weeks left, I’m pretty sure I’ll have plenty to do. Good thing I’m done Christmas shopping.” Keelee’s fingers slid to the button of his shirt. Her finger snaked in and rounded the small plastic disk. It popped out of its anchor.

“And you’re supposed to keep this from Amanda?”

Keelee nodded and circled her finger around the next button.

“She knows everything that goes on around here. How do you propose you do that?”

Keelee shrugged and popped the button free. “Maybe we should call in reinforcements.”

“Like who?” Adam watched as her fingers trailed down to the third button.


“Dad.” Keelee laughed at Adam’s groan. “Sorry, mood killer, huh?”

“Total mood assassin, but keep going. I’m sure I’ll be able to resuscitate the patient.”

Keelee slid her fingertip to the next button. “I’m positive you will, Doctor Cassidy.” She slid the button out of the material and snuck her fingers under his belt buckle.

Adam sucked a sharp breath when his wife’s fingers wiggled their way under his jeans and boxers and wrapped around his cock. “How long is Lizzy at Kadey’s?”

“All night.” Keelee lifted on her elbow and batted her eyelashes at him. “Oh, look, Doctor. I think we have a pulse.”

“ This sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.” Chad sat in the rocking chair in Chloe’s room. Their daughter was out like a light in his arms. Jasmine folded the last of the clean clothes

and put them away. She shut the drawer and smiled at her family. Chad's eyes had closed, and he'd stopped rocking. The man was burning the candle at both ends trying to get the last tracks of his new album recorded before everyone descended for Christmas. His mom was coming for Christmas for the first time. He wanted to make sure he could spend time with her instead of being cooped up in his studio.

"It is already a disaster, that's why we are going to go to Rapid tomorrow and sort out the flower situation."

Chad made a non-committal sound. Jasmine quietly crossed the room and took her daughter out of Chad's arms, which was getting more difficult. Chloe was growing like a weed. Chad roused and leaned forward rubbing his eyes. "Sorry." He stood up and stretched.

Jasmine threw him a smile as she laid Chloe down. "Shhhh..." She patted her daughter softly as she settled for the night. She kissed her on the forehead and headed for the door. Chad pulled it closed, leaving it open a crack.

He put his arm around her and they walked down the hall to their bedroom. "I'm assuming Joseph is driving y'all tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't doubt it." Joseph was *that* damn protective of Ember. They ambled into the master bedroom and passed into a closet just as big as the bedroom. They both liked clothes. It was an indulgence.

"If he doesn't, let me know and I'll drive with you." Chad pulled off his graphic t-shirt and dumped it into the closet hamper.

"I am more than capable of driving to Rapid, or have you forgotten?" She pulled her silk t-shirt off and smirked when Chad's mouth dropped open.

"Have you been wearing that all day?" He had his jeans half off.

Damn, his body was fine. The cross-fit workouts combined with the exercise routine Dixon and Drake had made for him had ripped his body. The man who could have literally any

woman in the world loved her. Their life was filled with love, laughter and the type of sex they both needed. Jasmine had learned a lot about herself since she'd met Chad.

“What? This old thing?” She motioned to the leopard skin corset. “Maybe.” She shimmied out of her jeans and kicked them to the side, revealing the lace-up, leopard skin panties underneath.

“Sweet mother of pearls.” Chad stood up, releasing his jeans to pool around his ankles. “How the hell do you get more beautiful every time I look at you?”

Jasmine sauntered over to him and ran her hands up the ridges of his abs. “I have dark magic that keeps you entranced.”

Chad stepped out of his jeans and walked her backward out of the closet and toward the bedroom as his fingers struggled to unlace her corset. The laces caught in her hair. He groaned as he worked to undo the bindings. “Do you have any dark magic to get you out of this contraption easier?” He stopped walking her backward when they reached the king-sized bed.

Jasmine pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and shook her head. “No. I guess I'll just have to pay my penance.” She dropped to her knees with her hands behind her back and nuzzled his stiff cock.

Chad's fingers carded through her hair and pulled it to the side. He tugged it back until she looked up at him. “I love you. What do you want tonight?”

She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his cock. “I think you should teach me a lesson about wearing clothes that are hard to get out of.”

He dropped her hair and sidestepped to sit on the side of the bed. “Then over my knee, my love.”

CHAPTER 5

Nic poured his best scotch into four tumblers and ginger ale into a fifth for Jason. The men he'd invited to his house laughed in the background. He carried the tray with their drinks to the sectional where they'd all gathered.

"Thank you." Christian took his drink and one for his husband, Jared.

Nic waited for Jacob and Jason to take their glasses and set the tray down, retrieving his.

Jared took a sip and made an appreciative noise. "This is the good stuff. What's the occasion?"

Nic caught a quick smile from Jacob who blanked his face quickly, but not fast enough. So much for the women not telling anyone. He cleared his throat. Dammit, he could feel heat rising to his cheeks. *Just blurt it out, man.* "Right. I asked Jade to marry me, and she said yes."

Nic expected congratulations, not utter silence and vacant expressions.

Finally, Jacob lifted his glass. "Congratulations, Nic. To the bravest, or most stupid, motherfucker on the face of the planet."

"Here, Here!" The other three raised their glasses in unison.

"Oh, fuck all of you. You knew!" An explosion of laughter detonated at Nic's outburst. "I should have known."

“Jacob told us on the way over. Congratulations, man.” Jared, his best friend in the fucking world, hugged him hard enough to crack a rib.

Jason spread his arms out. Nic backed away. “Boss-man, no offense, but...” He pointed at Jacob. “I’ve seen you make that monster turn purple with a hug. I’ll take a handshake.”

Jason laughed and extended his hand. “Congratulations. You deserve all the best.”

After Jason’s bone-crunching grip, Nic shook his hand up and down. “Man, how is it you don’t break that wife of yours?”

“Practice, my friend. Lots and lots of practice.” Jason smirked and raised his tumbler. Jason’s taunt launched another round of good-natured laughter and several off-color remarks.

“Congratulations, Nic. I’m glad my sister had the sense to say yes. You’re the only motherfucker alive crazy enough to try to make her settle down.” Nic thumped Jacob’s back when the man throttled him with a hug.

“Thanks, man. I think?”

“I’m happy for you.” Christian extended his hand.

Nic reached for it and brought the man into him for a hug. “I only hope I’m half as happy as you and J are, my friend.”

Christian’s eyes found his husband, and he leaned into Nic and whispered, “You will be. The Kings aren’t easy to bridle, but once you do, they learn manners pretty quick.”

Nic laughed and pulled away before Jared could give him the stink-eye. He loved Jared like a brother, but the man was jealous as fuck. Well, shit, it wasn’t just Jared, all the Kings were territorial as hell.

“So, the ulterior motive to inviting you here and giving you the good scotch was to ask each of you to be groomsmen.” Nic lifted the glass to his lips and watched his guests.

“Absolutely.”

“Sure.”

“Be happy to do it.”

“You got it.”

The responses tumbled out at the same time.

“Have you settled on a date?” Christian asked as he sat down on a loveseat.

“Ah... yeah. Christmas Eve.” Nic sat down, which was a little awkward when his prosthesis caught on the carpet, but he was used to making quick changes in his balance.

“Hell, you’ve got over a year to sweat her backing out.” Jared laughed.

Jacob snorted, “That’s what you think,” into his tumbler.

Nic shook his head. “No. Christmas Eve *this year*, and she wants to get married at the ranch as a surprise to Miss Amanda, so none of you can tell her this shit is happening.”

Jason sat down in one of the huge recliners, dwarfing it immediately. “Keep something from my mother? You do realize she is the one who raised us, right? The woman has this...”

“Spidey sense.” Jared finished.

“Damn straight. She knew if we were in trouble before we did. She’s going to know.” Jacob nodded his head. “Doesn’t matter if we keep our mouths shut.”

“Right. She’ll know.” Jason looked at his soda. “But, I won’t tell her.” He lifted his glass. Slowly all the others lifted their tumblers. “If she finds out, it won’t be from us. Whatever it takes.” Jason proposed.

“As long as it takes.” The echo died out when they all took a drink of the liquor.

“So, who’s making the betting pool?” Jacob asked.

“A pool for what?” Christian looked from Jacob to Jared.

“For when Mom finds out. I’ll do it. Starting when? Today?” Jared looked at his watch.

“No, yesterday, that’s when Jade told Jewell and Tori.” Nic laughed. “I want yesterday.”

“We have twenty days. Nic’s got yesterday. How much per day?”

“Twenty bucks a day.” Jason threw out. “Get Adam, Justin, Joseph, and Chad in on this too.”

“Hell, you know the women are going to want in.” Jacob laughed as he stood and headed back over to the scotch bottle. “This is going to be epic.”

Nic laughed and tossed back the last of his liquor. “Hey, wait. I need another groomsman. I know Justin and Chad, but not well enough to have them stand up for me.” Nic shrugged.

“Your younger brother?” Jared asked.

“He’s spending the holiday with Carmine. I don’t want to pull him away and give Carmine another reason to hate me.” Carmine still blamed both him and Jade for their mother’s death. There was a canyon of issues separating them, and they wouldn’t be solved in three weeks.

“You should ask Gabriel.” Jason’s suggestion came as Jacob poured two fingers into Nic’s glass.

“Do you think he’d do it? I mean, it’s Christmas Eve. I’m sure he has plans with his family.” Nic would love to have Gabriel stand with him. The man was the reason he was in the room with his new family in the first place.

“You won’t know until you ask him.” Jason reached for his phone and unlocked it. He pushed a button and extended the device to Nic. Calling Gabriel appeared on the face of the screen. *Well shit. No time like the present.*

CHAPTER 6

“*I*s this right, Mom?” Faith glanced over Reece’s shoulder. She scanned the problem and shook her head. “Almost, buddy, but you forgot to do something.”

“What?” Reece dropped his eyes back down to the numbers on the paper.

“You try to find it first.” She ruffled his hair as she walked by to check on dinner. She was running late tonight. She’d spent the afternoon with Dani and Jade. It was probably one of the most surreal experiences of her life. Since she’d been married to Jason, she and Jade had spent a total of eight or nine hours together... maybe. Not that they didn’t like each other, they did. But life was busy for both of them. Jade wanted her to be a bridesmaid? She’d never been in a wedding before.

“Mom.” Reece extended the word into ten syllables.

“Sorry, what baby?”

“I asked you for a hint.” Reece looked at his paper. “I can’t find what I forgot.”

Faith walked back over to him and leaned against the counter where he was sitting. “Okay, here is your clue. What do you do when the numbers you add equal ten or more.” Reece’s brow furrowed until the light bulb popped on. He carefully erased his answer and wrote the correct sum. He looked up at her with eager expectation. She lifted her hand and he high-fived her. “Good work. Now, you and Tippy can play until Dad gets home.”

“Okay!” Reece launched from the stool and darted out of the kitchen, followed closely by a black and white barking blur.

Faith put his homework beside his backpack so they wouldn't have to search for it in the morning and brought out the cutlery for dinner.

“Faith?”

Jason's evening announcement of his presence made her smile. “Kitchen.” She called out. He strode in and swept her into his arms, dropping a kiss on her that left her breathless and just a little tipsy.

“You look happy?” She asked when he lifted his head.

“I've got some interesting news.” He glanced around. “Where's Grandma's information source?”

“Playing in his room.” Tippy's happy barks came from the back of the house, confirming the dynamic duo's location.

Jason dropped his voice. “Did she tell you?”

“Yes! On Christmas Eve? Isn't that exciting?” Faith clamped her hand over her mouth and looked down the hall. She lifted it and whispered. “I've never been a bridesmaid. I'm so excited she included me!”

His hand cupped her cheek, and his face sobered to a serious expression. “Do you regret not having a church wedding?”

She leaned into his touch. “I regret nothing about our life. Not one minute.”

He leaned down and hovered over her lips with his. “Are we going to tell them at Christmas like we planned?” His hand reached down to her still flat stomach.

She lifted on her toes, closing the space between them for a second before she replied, “I think it would be okay. They get their moment on Christmas Eve, we can have ours on Christmas morning.” Faith had never been so happy in her life, and she wanted to share their good news with the entire family.

“Dad!”

Jason spun as Reece launched at him. Faith ducked out of the way of flying feet as Jason threw their son into the air. Through the laughter, she gave her typical warning, “Dinner in ten minutes. Wash up, you two!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Jason flipped Reece onto his back, piggyback style, then reached up over his shoulders and grabbed Reece under the armpits, pushing him up over his own head.

The boy extended his arms straight forward, and Jason crouched like a platform. “I’m Superman!”

Jason ran out of the room, and both of them made noises like they were flying. Faith caressed her stomach and looked down at the love that had become a baby. “You are so lucky to have that man as your daddy.”

“**W**hat do you think about repelling off the face of Mount Rushmore when we go to South Dakota? I know a guy, who knows a guy.” Justin ran his hands through Dani’s hair. She was draped over his chest, and somehow the silk sheets on their bed had twisted around them, binding them together. Not that he minded. He’d spend the rest of his days with this woman bound to him.

“In December?” Dani exaggerated a shiver. “Besides, isn’t that like defacing a National monument? Pass. What else do you have?”

“Hmmm... We could go to Jackson Hole. Skiing.” *Damn, that sounded like fun.* He pulled at the sheet, releasing the binding hold so he could roll her onto her side. “Imagine it. We could drop into some chutes and hogbacks, then maybe finish it up with dropping into Corbet’s Couloir.” He leaned down to kiss her. “I promise I’ll keep you warm.”

Dani pulled back and looked at him. “Oh, Corbet’s Couloir? What is that?”

“A double Black Diamond run outside Jackson Hole. It starts with a twenty-foot freefall and then it is a fast, slick, forty-five-degree angle to the end. So, what do you say?” He damn near vibrated with excitement. “We can book it and then go to the ranch on Christmas Eve, have Christmas with my family.”

“I can’t wait,” She sighed and wrapped her arms around his neck and fell into his kiss.

Fuck, the woman swamped him, left him stranded on an island of need and desire he prayed he’d languish on for the rest of his life.

Dani jerked and pushed at his chest. “Wait, no, we can’t.”

Justin lifted up. “Why?”

“Jade is getting married on Christmas Eve. In the afternoon. We have to be there at least the day before. It will be the first time I try on my dress.”

Justin’s laugh of disbelief wasn’t intentional. Okay, yes it was. “Jade? As in my sister?”

Dani nodded. “I was sworn to secrecy, so you can’t tell anyone. She’s doing this as a surprise so your mom doesn’t stress even more than she already is. With all of us going to the ranch for Christmas, Amanda has enough on her plate.”

Justin sat up, pulling the sheet off her beautiful body. He reached out and ran a finger across her collarbone. Her breath hitched, and her eyelids lowered. “You do realize that makes me the last unwed King.”

“Unwed, yes. Unclaimed, no way. You agreed to marry me, buster. Tuscany, in June. The venue is set, and I’ve bought my dress, so you’re not getting out of it.” Dani stopped his trailing finger and licked the tip of it before she swirled her tongue around it and sucked it in her mouth.

He could feel his eyes roll back in his head. “I’m yours, woman. Heart, body and soul.”

CHAPTER 7

Jade paced back and forth and scrolled through the document on her phone. Everything was done. *Wasn't it?*

“You’re exhausting me.” Nic walked into the bedroom, and Jade lost focus. Small rivulets of water ran down his chest. A towel wrapped around his waist. The crutches he used made his shoulders and arms flex with effort as he crossed the floor toward her.

She waited for him and leaned into him when he stood in front of her. “I’m freaking out.”

A low rumble of laughter vibrated against her ear. “You, freak out? Who are you, and what have you done with my woman?”

She lifted away and slapped him on the arm. “Stop. This is serious.” She spun on her heel and crawled into their bed. “We leave for the ranch tomorrow. Once we get there, it will be almost impossible to keep my mom oblivious.”

Nic made his way to his side of the bed and propped his crutches next to the nightstand. “Which is why we’ve delayed going back until tomorrow. It is just a couple days, Jade. You’ve been undercover for almost a year—assumed a fake identity and brought down a huge drug operation with them none the wiser. I think you can fool your mom for a few days.” He pulled the blankets back and slid between the sheets with her.

“You don’t know my mom. She’s got this talent or gift. She’s a human lie detector. She knows everything. It’s a superpower.” Jade dropped back onto the pillows. “I’m forgetting something.” She draped her arm over her eyes.

“Okay, let’s run down the list. First, we have a place to get married, right?”

Jade lifted her arm and glared at her future husband. “Yes, we have a place to get married.”

Nic held up another finger. “We have a license?”

Jade lifted up, folded her pillow in half and leaned back against it. “Yes, we got it when we were there at Thanksgiving.”

Nic nodded and lifted another finger. “We have a preacher who is going to do the ceremony?”

“You know we do. We went through the counseling sessions, and I sent him a stipend as a thank you for performing the ceremony.” Jade chuckled. “I added one hell of a tip because he was doing the ceremony on Christmas Eve. I think that’s his busy season, if you catch my drift.”

“I agree. So, we have a location, a license, and a preacher. *We* are going to be there and, worst-case scenario, we’ll pull two strangers into the church to be our witnesses.” Nic rolled over and pushed her hair off her shoulder. “Baby, anything else is just noise. If everything goes to hell, we will still be married.”

She rolled into him and thumped his chest with her fist. “Dammit, you’re going to make me cry, and I don’t fucking cry.”

“Of course you don’t.” Nic lay down and pulled her into his chest. “Just wait, in a few days we’ll look back at this and laugh. You’re worrying about nothing.”

Jade slid her hand through the hair on his chest. *Dammit, he was right. What was the worst that could happen? Enough acting like a dame without a brain.* “You’re right. I’m blowing this out of proportion. Fuck it. We’ve got this.” She lifted up and straddled him. “Fuck me into oblivion, handsome.”

Nic laughed and flipped her over. “There’s the woman I’m marrying.”

CHAPTER 8

Jasmine covered her mouth with a shaking hand. No. This couldn't be... She opened the second box and then the third. "Oh fuck, this is a nightmare." *No, no, no!*

She grabbed her phone and punched the screen frantically.

Keelee answered on the third ring. "Hey."

"Girl, grab Em and get over here. We have a huge problem." Jasmine looked at the horrid mess that spilled out of the open boxes.

"Uh... sure, I can babysit for you and Chad this afternoon."

What? Oh, fuck, she was with Amanda. "Shit. Okay, so Mom's there. I'll call Em. You get here as soon as you can. Got it? Tell her I need to wrap some last-minute gifts or something."

"Cool, yeah, no problem, I'll wander over in a bit. Bye."

Jasmine hit the disconnect button and dialed Em.

She answered on the second ring. "Hi, did they come in?"

"Girl, it is a fucking disaster. Get over here."

"Why, what's wrong?"

Jasmine shook her head and pulled her hand through her hair. "I... it's... fuck, just come over here. We have a huge problem."

“Oh, my god... what color is that?” Em picked up her dress with two fingers as if the atrocious color could slip off the fabric and contaminate her.

Keelee nudged the boxes out of the way, picked up a random dress and made her way to the window. “Shit, natural lighting doesn’t help this at all. Umm... I think it is a cross between puke yellow and snot green.”

Jasmine groaned. “Yeah. How could she do this to us?”

“Have you called Jade?” Em took the dress to the full-length mirror and held it in front of her.

“She’s in the air on her way here. They’re supposed to land at eleven.” Jasmine picked up her dress. “I have never seen such an ugly ass color in my life. It seriously looks like baby poo!”

“I can’t imagine she wanted this color. The manufacturer had to have made a mistake. What color are the ties?” Keelee nodded toward the small box that hadn’t been opened yet.

“Does it matter?” Em held the dress against her and grimaced. “I mean, we can’t even dim the lights. It is an afternoon wedding.”

Keelee’s eyes popped up. “Could we bleach it? Make it paler or even white would be better than... throw-up.”

“I thought I was blowing it out of proportion.” Jasmine gazed around the room. “I wasn’t, was I?”

“Oh, hell, no. If anything, I think this is worse than you led me to believe.” Ember flopped down in one of Jasmine’s overstuffed chairs. Layers of the disgusting colored taffeta skirting pooled around her lap.

“Jade’s going to freak.” Keelee slumped into the couch. “Personally, I’d cry. You can’t make this pretty. There is no way.”

“I know.” Jasmine dropped into a chair and dropped her head back. “What are we going to do?”

“Damned if I know. Jade’s going to have to make the call on this.” Em replied. “Did Chad go to pick up the flowers?”

Jasmine lifted her head and sighed. “Yeah, he should be back about two. They called yesterday and said they had to make some substitutions because the flower shipment was late.”

Em sat forward. “Wait, we had basic flowers. What kind of substitutions?”

“They didn’t say. Only if we wanted the arrangements, we’d have to accept some creative leeway. They have us over a barrel. What was I supposed to do?”

“Girl, it will be fine.” Keelee lifted the dress she’d picked up. “What about airbrushing? You know where they spray a fine mist of paint?” She made a motion with her hand.

“Do you have an airbrush machine or know where we can find one?” Jasmine lifted off the couch. Any idea was better than the horror that lay at her feet.

“Sadly, no.” Keelee shook her head. “Sorry, I’m not being helpful.”

“I guess we hang these up and wait for Jade.”

“Did her dress come in?” Ember cast a worried look at the boxes on the floor.

“Scheduled for delivery this afternoon according to the shipping tracker.” Jasmine stood up and grabbed a hanger. “Come on, ladies. Let’s get this hung up and steamed. Not that taking the wrinkles out will improve the look, but...”

“Yeah. Do what you can.” Em stood and grabbed a hanger.

“Maybe the color will grow on us.” Keelee lifted off her chair. Jasmine looked at her and lifted an eyebrow. “Or not.”

CHAPTER 9

“Do you know what’s going on with the kids?” Amanda sipped her coffee and gazed into the fireplace. There were too many furtive glances between her children and odd comments from the ones in Washington. She’d learned long ago not to disregard her instinct.

Frank grunted and turned the page of his newspaper.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t notice.” She glanced at her husband. His hair was almost completely silver now. The lines in his face deeper, but beyond that, he was still the amazing, sexy man she’d fallen head over heels in love with.

He glanced at her, still holding the paper up. “It’s Christmas.”

Amanda nodded and considered the point. The children could be trying to stage some Christmas surprise... but all of them? The plane from Washington should have touched down already. Once she had all of her children in one room, she’d be able to tell who the ringleader was—that and Reece would tell her everything she wanted to know and then some. The little boy was a wealth of information.

“Don’t go spoiling their surprise. You’d hate it if they spoiled yours.” Frank turned the page and leaned back in his chair.

“Hmmm... so you admit there is a surprise?”

“Nope. Just figured if you saw something, it was probably about the season.”

She pushed her chair, making the rocker glide back and glanced up at the twenty-foot pine tree that stood in the corner of the room. There were boxes of lights, ornaments, and garland to be used. She'd pop popcorn, and the older kids, including some of her grown babies, would eat half while stringing it. Hot chocolate, apple cider, Christmas carols, and excited children would rule the ranch tonight. With ten kids between them, and eight grandchildren, plus husbands, wives, fiancés and significant others, the tree would be overrun with love and presents. "It's going to be so good to have them all home for Christmas. It was what I wanted this year."

Frank folded his paper and set it down. His gaze fell to the tree. He grunted an agreement before he glanced over at her. "Got the best present in the world sitting next to me. Beyond that, having the kids here is all I could ever ask for as well."

Amanda reached out her hand, and he took it. "You are the best man in the world, Frank Marshall."

"No, ma'am. But you make me want to be." He squeezed her hand gently.

She blinked back happy tears. After being widowed and raising five boys and three girls by herself, finding her soulmate was the last thing Amanda had expected. But she found him, and for that she was thankful. "We are blessed, Frank. Blessed beyond my comprehension."

"Truer words were never spoken." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. "Before the horde descends and things get crazy, I want you to know I know how hard you worked to get them here and make everything perfect. I love you."

"Gramma! Grampa! We're here!" The front door slammed open, and the rush of little feet brought them both out of their chairs.

Amanda fell to her knees and braced for the multitudes of hugs heading her way. She was blessed. Well and truly blessed.

CHAPTER 10

Jade made her way downstairs after unpacking for her and Nic. She could hear the hubbub of commotion in the great room. The kids were hyper after the flight. Jade made a right turn at the bottom of the stairs and headed to the kitchen. It would be quieter there. She loved her nieces and nephews, but all of them together, hyper and amped about Christmas? Well, distance was her friend right now.

Two minutes after sitting down with a cup of hot apple cider that was simmering in the crockpot on the counter, Em walked in. She shut the door and put her back against it. “Jade, what color were the bridesmaids dresses supposed to be?”

“A dark red. Why?” A horrible sick feeling dropped over her.

Em pushed the door open and checked the hallway before she scurried over to the table and pulled out a piece of lurid yellow-greenish-brown material. “What the hell happened to this tie?” Jade lifted it and winced. “Fuck, did someone puke on it?”

“No, this is the color *of everything*.” Em hissed.

Everything? What was everything? Her sister-in-law wasn't making sense. Ember pointed to the tie and whispered, “The dresses are this color.”

“Oh for fuck's sake!”

“Shhhh...”

“No, this can’t be happening.” Jade started pacing. “Okay, okay. We can fix this.”

“Fix what?”

Her mom’s question spun her on a dime. “Oh... I forgot to pack a part of Joseph’s gift from Ember.” She slid her panicked gaze at her sister-in-law, silently begging for help.

“Yeah, I wanted her to swing by the...” Ember glanced back at Jade.

“Jewelers! For cufflinks.” Jade wanted to slap her hand over her mouth. Like Joseph used cufflinks. The man lived in jeans. She’d seen him in a suit once, and that was at her dad’s funeral.

Amanda’s eyebrows lifted toward the ceiling. “Oh, well that’s a nice gift, dear. Were you planning on going somewhere that he’ll need to wear formal attire?”

“Well, actually it was for...”

“My wedding.” Dani stood in the door of the kitchen. “We’ve decided on a formal affair in a lovely Tuscan vineyard, and when I told Ember, she worried that Joseph wouldn’t feel comfortable, so she bought him a tailor-made suit, shoes, and cufflinks for Christmas. We were going to tell you at dinner tonight. We have three dates we are looking at in June so we can crunch calendars.”

“Right!” Ember twirled to Amanda.

Jade swallowed down her looming panic. She was going to fucking hug the stuffings out of Dani. The woman just saved her ass and looked casual as fuck when she did it.

Amanda cocked her head and her gaze swept from woman to woman. “Oh, well, hopefully, it doesn’t ruin the surprise.” She turned and grabbed the crockpot full of apple cider. “Would one of you please bring those cups in?”

Jade watched the door swing shut behind her mom and deflated. “Fuck, that was close,” she whispered as she snuck to the door and peeked down the hall.

“Dani, you saved our asses!” Ember gave the woman a high five.

“It wasn’t a lie. We are having a formal wedding in a Tuscan vineyard. I just added two and two together. What was going on that I had to rescue you?”

“Girl, it’s a disaster.” Jade retrieved the tie from silverware drawer where Em had shoved it when Amanda surprised them. “This is the color of the bridesmaids dresses.”

“Oh, dear God in heaven. That is atrocious.” Dani placed her hand on her chest and cringed.

“What are we going to do?” Ember rolled up the tie and shoved it in her jeans pocket.

“The first thing I’m going to do is find something stronger than cider. Then we need to find a way to get over to Jasmine’s. My dress is supposed to arrive today. If it looks anything like that tie, I’ll... hell, barf for one, then who the fuck knows.”

“What does she have planned for this afternoon?” Jade asked as she opened the door and peeked down the hall.

“Movie time for the kids. She’s got princess and superhero movies.” Ember followed her out the door.

Jade crooked her finger at Dani, “You’re part of this, too.”

“You know I’ve never had a sister. If this is what it is like, I’m not sure I was missing anything. What about the cups your mom wants?”

Jade laughed. “Fuck you. Not like you didn’t know I was bossy. She’ll send one of the kids in for them if we don’t bring them.” They tiptoed into Frank’s study, and Jade shut the double doors. She made her way to the long bar and smiled. “Ahhh... the good hooch.” Jade lifted a crystal decanter and waved it in the air. “Three?”

“Screw it. I’m in.” Em sat down on the barstool.

Dani glanced at her watch and lifted an eyebrow. “It’s only a little past noon.”

Ember pulled out the tie and waved it at her.

The woman blanched. “Yeah, make it a double.”


“My kind of sisters-in-law.” Jade poured the amber liquid into the tumblers and downed hers first, promptly pouring herself another. “Okay, so we need us three, Tori, Faith and Jewell over at Jasmine’s this afternoon during movie time. Em, see if Keelee can run interference for us?”

“I’ll ask, but we will need backup. What about Nic and Justin?” She waggled her finger between Jade and Dani.

“I can tell Justin what we are doing. He’ll stick around and help your mom. He likes kids.” Dani downed her drink and gasped. “Shit, I thought you said that was the good stuff.”

Jade laughed and splashed more into Dani’s glass. “Nah, girl, I said I needed something stronger and that this was the good hooch. Frank and I like the throat burning stuff.” She glanced over at a small table with ornate bottles. “That’s the good stuff. It would be lost on me.” She lifted her glass of cheap whiskey and toasted her sisters-in-law. “Here’s to enough alcohol to circumvent that shit-stain of a color.”

Ember raised her glass. “I hate to tell you, but there isn’t enough alcohol in the world for that.”

“**Y**ou look beautiful.”  Jasmine had never seen her sister look so happy. The white dress she’d chosen was perfect for her. Lace sleeves and neckline to a fitted silk bodice and a pencil skirt. A bright red sash tied in a bow at the back. “Beautiful.”

Everyone else breathed relieved sighs and compliments when Jade entered the room. She made her way to the full-length mirror and smiled at the reflection. “So, one problem down.” She spun and looked at the wall of what they’d affectionately started calling diarrhea green material.

“I found out what happened.” Jewell lifted the tablet from her seat. “You told us the number was JB78K5. The color you

wanted was JV78K5.” She tapped the screen and brought up a color chart. “Right?”

Jade took the pad and nodded. “Yeah, but what are we going to do about,” She waved her arm at the visual assault to everyone’s senses. “That.”

Tori passed the bottle of single malt they’d commandeered from Chad’s stash. Jasmine held out her glass for a refill as it passed by.

“Burn them in effigy?” Em’s comment started a round of laughter.

“Did everyone bring a dress to wear to church for Christmas services?” Tori asked when the giggles subsided.

Jasmine watched as everyone nodded. “Then I say we wear our own dresses, let the guys where the suits they brought. It will be casual, but the idea is getting you two married and making beautiful memories, not...”

“Shit-stained ones.” Jade finished her sentence, sending everyone into a fit of laughter again.

“Right, that.” Tori acknowledged.

“Perfect. That problem is solved.” Jasmine lifted off the couch. “Jade, go change out of that, so it doesn’t get dirty or wrinkled.”

Jade downed her alcohol. “I will, in a minute. First, we need to figure out how to get Mom to the church tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ve got that one covered.” Jasmine raised her hand. She tiptoed through the women sitting on the floor to her desk. She grabbed an envelope and pulled out an elegant white card.

“I did this online. Tonight before dinner, I’m going to deliver it to everyone staying at the ranch during the holidays. I figured you wouldn’t mind the extended family coming to the wedding.” She handed it to Jade.

“You are cordially invited to an event honoring Christmas, love, and joy, hosted by the King Family.” Jade read the words

and paused. “It has the time, date and location.” She closed the card and hugged Jasmine tightly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It also says Christmas casual for the dress.” Jasmine sat on her desk and swung her legs.

“Oh my God, that is perfect. We can give one to Frank and Amanda at dinner. That will explain the mystery she no doubt has picked up on.” Tori smiled from ear to ear. “Jasmine, we really miss you at Guardian. Are you sure we couldn’t lure you back?”

“Never in a million years.” Jasmine loved her new life as mother, wife, and chief of Chad’s security when he toured. His touring was rare and controlled, with limited venues and only during the summer so when Chloe started school they’d all be home.

“Okay, so we have fixed the Vogue vomit issue. Who is decorating the church in the morning?” Jasmine watched as Jade spun around looking for... oh, the alcohol decanter. She shook her head. “I can’t. We have all the kids and the husbands coming here tomorrow morning. Amanda thought wearing them out would help take the edge off the Christmas Eve excitement. We are going to give prizes out and have hot cocoa.”

“What time?” Faith asked from the couch where she’d been sitting quietly.

“Nine, so we will be done in time to get everyone back, cleaned up, and ready for the ceremony at noon.” Jasmine knew sledding for an hour to an hour and a half would wear out the kids, and the men, too.

“Oh, God, please do not let my fiancé break his ass before we get married.” Jade extended her tumbler to Dani who’d ended up with the bottle.

Ember threw one of the barf colored ties towards Faith. The woman laughed and ducked out of the way. Jasmine noted the amount of alcohol remaining in the tumbler Faith held in her hand. She hadn’t touched it. Interesting. She lifted her eyebrows at Faith who blushed and glanced away. Bingo.

Instead of calling her out on it, Jasmine asked, “How many do we need at the church to decorate? It is just flowers on the pews, our bouquets, and the altarpiece, right? I think Keelee, Sky, and Lyric are getting the food, drinks and wedding cake ready to move before they head to the church for the event.”

“Wait, who’s Lyric?” Jade pounced on the new name. “Does she know about the secret? Seriously, guys, who doesn’t know what’s happening tomorrow?”

The women exchanged looks. Ember shrugged, “Amanda and Frank don’t know. Oh, and Aunt Betty.”

“Reece doesn’t.” Faith added quietly.

Jade pointed at Faith while she took another drink of liquor. When she finished, she said, “That’s a good thing. Love that little boy to death, but he doesn’t keep secrets well.”

“Truth.” Tori laughed, “My boys don’t know either. They are too primed for Christmas to wonder what’s going on with the adults.”

“Right.” Jade nodded. Her face pulled, and she glanced at Jasmine. “Again, who is Lyric?”

“Isaac’s woman.” Jewell glanced up at Jade.

“Who the fuck is Isaac?” Jade glanced at Tori. The woman stood up and whispered in Jade’s ear. Jade blinked, leaned away from Tori and asked, “Really?”

“Yes.” Tori acknowledged.

“Oh. Well, shit. Okay. I’d like to meet that woman.”

Jewell levered herself off the floor. “I suggest we have a Christmas Day bonfire with these.” She fluffed one of the taffeta dresses as she passed by. “They are butt ugly.”

“I don’t care what happens to them.” Jade shook her head. “Right, now back to the plan. Flowers tomorrow morning. Who?”

“Tori and I can do it.” Em looked at her sister-in-law for confirmation.

Tori nodded. “No problem. Jacob will be busy with the boys. I can take Tristan with us if he doesn’t want to sled.”

“Joey can watch Tristan and Blake.” Jasmine chuckled at the way Em offered her husband up without consulting him. Joseph would do anything for Ember, so it was a safe bet she didn’t need to ask if the man had other plans.

“Okay. Then what we need is everyone in the wedding party to be at the church by eleven. We can do some quick pictures and then I’ll hide out until everyone arrives.” Jade’s hand ran down the lace of one sleeve. She looked up and gazed around the room. A radiant smile split her face. “Y’all, I’m getting married tomorrow. How fucking unbelievable is that shit!”

CHAPTER 11

“Is it done?” Keelee looked behind Sky to the counter. Three round cakes sat partially iced on the marble. Nope, the cake didn’t look done to her.

“Not quite. Thank goodness Amanda invited Kadey to movie time with Lizzy. I thought you were supposed to be there to help?” Sky walked back over to the counter.

Keelee followed her. “I was, but half of them are asleep, the other half are engrossed in the movie, so I told Amanda I was popping home for a few minutes to set up for the Christmas cookie decorations we’re doing with them when they finish the movies. I wanted to make sure you had everything you needed and that you’ll be there to help me control the chaos.”

“I’m finishing up now. Kaeden can’t go to the wedding, he has someone on assignment and needs to be close by in case they call in, so he volunteered to take the cakes, food, and alcohol over to the big house while we are at the ceremony.”

“We’ll stack the layers there?” Keelee swiped her finger through some of the royal icing remaining in the bowl. She licked the white confection off her finger. “Damn, that’s good.”

“Thanks. Here you can do me a favor and spin the cake as I pipe.” Sky forced the icing down in the bag and started piping. “That’s good, just that speed.”

Keelee slowly turned the wheel, marveling at Sky’s steady hand. “I think we may actually pull off this surprise.” Keelee

waited while Sky repositioned with a new frosting bag and a different tip.

“I’m doing a crisscross design on this layer and using the silver sugar balls at the intersecting lines.” Sky motioned to the largest round cake. “That one is getting edged top and bottom and roses on the surface of the tier and then smaller amounts of flowers on the other two, topped with a traditional bride and groom piece. I hope it turns out.”

“Have you done the flowers?” Keelee looked around the kitchen but didn’t see anything.

Sky laughed and nodded. “Go look at the top shelf.” She nodded toward the cupboard that normally held coffee cups. Keelee ambled over and opened the door. “Oh, they are beautiful.” Red and white roses with green leaves sat drying on a sheet of parchment paper. “When did you do these?”

“Last night after Kadey and Lizzy went to sleep. The little sneak almost caught me, but thankfully Kaeden intercepted her before she could come into the kitchen. Remind me not to make a super-secret wedding cake again, will you?” Sky put down the piping bag and grabbed a small container. “Here, you can do this. See, take one ball and place it at the intersection where the frosting crisscrosses.” She demonstrated on two before she handed the small plastic jar to Keelee.

Keelee washed her hands quickly before she shook out several silver beads into the palm of her hand and started working. “She’s going to love this. I know you don’t know her, but Jade is an awesome lady. She says whatever is on her mind and has no filter.” Keelee laughed, “Her brothers are afraid of her.”

Sky laughed and changed bags with other tips as she worked. “Sounds like an awesome lady. She’s Jasmine’s twin?”

“Yeah, but they aren’t identical and personality wise, they are complete opposites, although both of them are, or were, personal security officers.” Keelee finished pushing the last silver pearl into the icing and leaned back.

“That’s a pretty tough career isn’t it?” Sky stuck her tongue between her lips and frowned as she made a different edging on the top layer of cake.

“Yeah, not wilting flowers, those King ladies.” Keelee swiped another finger full of frosting. “Speaking of non-wilted flowers, where is Lyric?”

Sky chuckled but kept her attention focused on the piping she was doing. “She found out this morning Isaac is coming back tomorrow. She’s been cooking all day. Aunt Betty has been down at that little cottage with her. They were having a great time when I called earlier.”


“Are you all done with the party food?” Keelee stretched and glanced around the pristine kitchen.

“We are. I’m using the kitchen in the dining facility as a holding space.” Sky finished her edging and stood, stretching her back. “Done. Tomorrow when we get back to the ranch, I’ll bring over the flowers and stack the cake there. I’ve already placed the support system so it won’t fall. The columns in between the layers are surrounded with the flowers so I can raise each tier.”

“It’s beautiful. Thank you for doing this.”

“Thank you for trusting me. I had fun, but I’ll admit I’ll be glad when this wedding is over.”

Keelee laughed and slid down from her stool. “Girl, I think that is the understatement of the holiday season.”

Frank watched the men  laughing. Brothers, relations, or just family by choice, the men in this room were some of the best people he’d ever met. He was proud to call each one son. There were two missing. Dixon and Chief. He didn’t figure either was happy about their location right about now. Those two men were meant to be here on the ranch. Obligations and assignments had kept them from coming home.

“So, where’s the ball and chain?” Jacob grabbed Drake around the neck as he asked.

Drake pushed him off and then flipped him off. “Jillian is working. She had an idea she wanted to get down. She’ll be here for dinner.” Drake threw a glance at Frank. “She set the alarm, so she won’t be late.”

Frank raised his tumbler of holiday spirits at his boy. “So, when are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Frank’s words stilled the entire room. Nervous glances, a cleared throat, and a mumbled dammit, confirmed his suspicions. At one point, to a person, everyone looked toward Nic. He studied Jade’s boyfriend. “Tell me you did not get her pregnant.”

Jacob slapped Zane and murmured, “That is exactly what I said. Of course, I got the stink-eye for saying it.”

Nic’s face flamed redder than a hot poker. He shook his head. “No sir, we’re not pregnant. That is something that Jade is firm about. She loves her nieces and nephews, but...”

“She doesn’t want to be a mom,” Jared interjected. He sat on the couch. Christian’s hand touched Jared’s shoulder. Frank loaded that movement into his brain to unpack later.

Frank grunted and started rocking his chair. He leaned back and took a sip of the good stuff. “Didn’t answer my question.”

The men cast long glances at each other. Jason cleared his throat—again. “Sir, we were sworn to secrecy. If we say anything, it could ruin a surprise that everyone has worked pretty damn hard to make happen.”

“But all of you know it.” Frank watched as all the heads in the room went north and south.

Drake shook his head and glanced at the men in the room. “I’m not involved in whatever is going around. I’ve been too damn busy.” He glanced at Frank after he spoke.

“Hmmm... never figured a wedding needed to be kept secret.” He watched every face blank in surprise.

“How—” Nic sputtered as he pushed himself to the front of the couch.

Frank held up a hand. “Gabriel called and wanted to know if we had enough rooms for him and his family tonight. He’s going to stand with you, right?” He looked at Nic. The man nodded his head.

Justin shifted. “Does Mom know?”

Frank shook his head. “I asked him to make sure Anna didn’t tell Amanda.”

Nic let out a lungful of air. “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome.” He pushed his chair again, starting the glide. “So, I reckon tonight after dinner we need to have a bachelor party.”

Jacob let out a whoop of laughter. “Damn straight. Doc, can we use the clinic?”

Jared groaned and folded into the couch. “Not the clinic. That was the worst fucking hangover of my entire life.”

“Yeah, but only because you drank yourself into a coma of self-denial.” Jason winked at Christian who blushed the color of a fire hydrant.

“The clinic is open. Stag night it is.” Doc glanced at Frank. “You and Gabriel are coming, right?”

Frank shook his head. “Can’t speak for him, but I’ll pass. I have a bottle of liquor that is as old as dirt. Plan on having a drink with Gabriel and Anna. I’ll send his boys over though.” Frank had met Gabriel’s twin boys several times, only they were no longer boys.

“They old enough to drink?” Justin furrowed his forehead. “They aren’t, are they?”

Jacob shrugged. “Beats the fuck out of me. I’ve never met them.”

Jason laughed. “Old enough to graduate from the Air Force Academy. They are heading to basic flight training in January.”

“Excellent! Another set of twins that fly!” Jacob laughed and toasted Drake.

“See, genetic disposition.” Drake retorted. “Proof positive twins are superior to everyone else.”

Jason threw a peanut at Drake. “Hey, I fly, and I am not a twin.”

“Yeah, well, genetic anomalies happen.” Doc taunted and then ducked when Jason let loose with another peanut.

“Do not piss off the boss,” Jason warned the room and waggled his eyebrows, which set everyone in the room into a fit of laughter.

Justin snorted and called out, “Believe me, I would never piss off Dani. I don’t think you’d risk pissing Faith off either.”

The room exploded in laughter again, and Frank absorbed it like a balm to his soul. He was so fucking rich, and money had absolutely nothing to do with the wealth that surrounded him.

CHAPTER 12

*F*rank left before the stag party and headed to the kitchen where he found his wife, working. “How you doing?”

Amanda startled at his voice. “Movie time was great. I sent the kids off with Keelee to bake Christmas cookies. Dinner is all prepped. I just need to start the roasts. Betty and I peeled all the potatoes yesterday, and they are sitting in cold water in the fridge. Veggies and bread are all ready to cook, salads are made, and desserts are going into the oven when we sit down. Besides clean up, I have just the last bit of wrapping to do tonight after dinner.” She smiled and spun in his arms. “I’m so happy to have them all home at the same time.”

“I couldn’t tell.” Frank deadpanned and was rewarded with a delicious kiss.

“Do you have enough breakfast and lunch for six more?” Frank knew she did, but he needed to tell her that Gabriel and Anna were coming in.

“Always, who’s coming?”

“Gabriel, Anna, and the kids. They are stopping here overnight and then heading to their home in Colorado tomorrow afternoon.”

“Why?” Amanda’s brow furrowed. “That came out wrong. It is wonderful that they’re stopping by, but why are they dropping in so close to Christmas?”

Frank shrugged. “If I had to guess, I’d figure it has something to do with Guardian.”

“Oh, well... that makes sense.” She blinked and put her hand on his arm. “You don’t think it is something that will take one of them away before Christmas, do you?”

“Couldn’t say, but I doubt it. If it were an emergency, he wouldn’t be stopping over. They have secure coms for that type of thing.”

“You’re right. I’m making mountains out of molehills.” Amanda kissed him again and sighed before pointing toward two, huge, prime rib roasts. “I could use your help putting those in the top oven.”

Frank obliged and carried the heavy pans over to the oven, lifting them with ease. When the last slid into place, Amanda asked, “What time will Gabriel and Anna be here?”

“He said about eight or nine, depending on the weather. There is a system between D.C. and us they may have to fly around.” Frank wrapped his arms around her waist and sat his chin on her shoulder, watching as she uncovered a casserole to put in one of the other three ovens. They’d expanded the kitchen to make room for the size of the family as it grew. Best damn thing he’d ever done. He could convert this house into a hotel in less time than it took to hog-tie a calf, and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Amanda sat down at the table, tired, but happy her family was all here, under one roof. Frank stood, and a hush fell over the table. A quiet ‘*shhh*’ from Faith and Tori stilled the children’s chatter.

“I know you’re as hungry as I am, but you’ll need to wait until I say my bit. Amanda and I are proud of each of you. The lives you lead are... exceptional, but it is the type of people you are that is important. There isn’t a way to describe knowing the force of good under this roof, and at this time of year we count each and every blessing we have.” He reached his hand out to Amanda, and she took it, trying hard not to tear up. “We consider each of you a gift from the Maker, and we thank you for taking the time to come home when there are so many other demands on you. You’ve made us both very happy.

I'd ask that you remember those who aren't here tonight—Dixon, Chief, and Tatyana, and keep them in your prayers.” He cleared his throat and nodded to the food. “Well, go on then, don't let it get cold.”

Frank squeezed her hand, and she smiled at him. “That's more words than you've said all month.” He grunted at her and then winked.

She turned to look down the table. “So, what did everyone do while I entertained my beautiful grandchildren?”

“We had a drink with Frank,” Jacob said as he grabbed the potatoes being passed his way.

“We went to Jasmine's and visited.” Faith's quiet voice added over the clanking of the silverware and quiet murmurs of please pass this and that.

“I readied the kitchen for Christmas cookie decorations.” Keelee passed the veggies to Adam and grabbed the bread that Ember was passing to her.

“We had fun, Gramma!” Reece piped up.

“Yeah, we made reindeers,” Talon added.

“Reindeer.” Tori corrected.

“Right. Reece did one, and I did one, so they were two. Reindeers.” Talon acknowledged.

“What's on the agenda for tomorrow?” Jason asked as he stabbed a slice of prime rib from the platter going around.

“Well, tomorrow morning the kids are coming with me to Jasmine's house.” Amanda looked down the table at her grandchildren. Angelic faces turned her way in anticipation. “We are going to go sledding down the big hill by her house.” The table erupted with cheers. Amanda waited until it quieted some. “I figured the gentlemen could accompany us since, as Jasmine pointed out, they'd make it a competition.” Amanda watched Jared and Jacob exchange looks and then glance at Nic. “Okay, what was that? That look right there.”

Jacob blinked as he realized she was pointing at him and Jared. He cleared his throat and glanced down the table. “Well,

the gentlemen, as you put it, had planned on an evening of ... gentlemanly pursuits tonight.” He pointed his fork and made a swirl of the table. “The gentlemen may want to sleep in.”

Amanda chuckled. Well, okay, those were her boys. They got together and cut loose. They were safe here, not on call, for the most part, and able to let their hair down. “The gentlemen can sleep in until eight thirty. We sled at nine.” She looked pointedly at each of her sons by birth, Joseph, Justin, Jason, Jacob, and Jared, and then each of her sons by choice, Drake, Nic, Chad, Christian and Zane. A soft murmur of ‘yes, ma’ams’ got a chuckle from Frank.

Tori cleared her throat and stood up. “I’ve been asked to give this to you, Amanda. I know you’ve noticed there has been a secretive... something... going on. Someone in this room had an idea, and we all decided to jump on the bandwagon. So...” She handed the card to Jacob, who passed it down the line.

Amanda glanced at Frank, and he shrugged. “It ain’t going to open itself.” He stabbed a piece of prime rib and waited for her to open it.

Amanda read the card and glanced down the table to a sea of upturned, expectant faces. “At the church? At noon on Christmas Eve?” She read the card again. “And you’re not going to tell me what this celebration entails?” She searched the faces at the table. The expressions ranged from blank: Joseph and Jason—to guilty: Jacob and Jared’s permanent expression—to hopeful: Jewell, Tori, Jade, Jasmine, and Faith. Zane lifted an eyebrow at her and smiled. Nic seemed consumed with putting spoonfuls of sugar into his already sweetened tea and Christian blushed, shrugged and turned to butter a piece of bread. She had no idea what to do with that. She couldn’t read Dani and Justin. Drake wasn’t looking at her. Instead, he was whispering to Jillian. Her look of growing shock told Amanda more than anything else. She glanced at Keelee and Adam and then at Chad. Chad smiled back at her. “You know I love you, but I will not be the weakest link. I’m not saying diddly squat.” The table erupted with laughter.

Amanda smiled and glanced at the card. The church at noon. *Interesting.*

CHAPTER 13

“*T*hat’s bullshit!” Nic couldn’t feel his lips, but he sure as hell knew when an exaggeration moved into a bald-faced lie.

“I’m serious as a heart attack.” Jared held up his fingers in a Star Trek salute. “Scout’s honor.”

Justin threw a wadded-up napkin at his brother. “That’s live long and prosper, dumbass.”

Jared glanced at his hand and extended his arm fully, squinting at it. “Whatever, you know what I meant.”

Justin glanced at Jacob and Jason. “You have kids. What’s the correct salute for Scout’s honor?” They lifted their hands and displayed the Boy Scout salute. Justin mimicked the salute, twisted his wrist and then let his middle finger fly at his brother.

“I swear he did it. I don’t know how, but that man,” Jared pointed at Jacob, who was sitting across the room from Nic, “is the reason Gabriel started the complex here.”

Jacob shrugged. “I suggested a place where teams could come to rehab, and it turned into this.” He lifted his tumbler, talking to the amber liquid instead of anyone in the room. “In reality, this complex was a combination of ideas and suggestions.” He pointed toward Drake. “The twins and Chief have been the energy behind building on those ideas.” He nodded toward Adam. “Doc took this clinic and then built a hospital. He has a rehab facility to rival any on the east coast, and he’s in charge of it all. The other extensions are all Jason.

It may have been my idea, but this is the fruition of everyone's efforts."

"And now we are set to open one in Arizona," Nic added.

"Yep, and we are looking for another site in the southeast," Jason confirmed the rumors he'd heard. Three stateside complexes. Guardian was expanding like a wind-stoked wildfire raging across drought-stricken prairie grass.

"Any thoughts to an overseas complex?" Justin lifted from the stool he was sitting on and headed to the makeshift bar they'd built on an exam table.

"There have been talks. Gabriel knows a person who has property in several countries. The problem would be airlift and accessibility. It is something we are looking at, but with the current escalations, it will have to wait." Jason explained.

"Where are Chad and Christian?" Nic suddenly realized they were missing.

Jared waved toward the door. "They started talking about a benefit for the center. They went over to Chad's to check on his availability and to call some of his friends in the industry."

"At ten o'clock at night?" Nic wasn't sure that made sense.

"Performers are night creatures by habit." Justin chimed in from the bar. "They always book the last seating for the night at the restaurants. Besides, Chad wanted to catch them before Christmas Eve. He said he wanted to approach them while they were in the Christmas spirit, but not piss them off by invading family time."

"The man is smart." Jared agreed.

Jason drank the last of his soda. "Hey, bring me some more, would you?"

Justin grabbed a can of soda and gave it to Jason. "Anyone else?" He held up a bottle and nodded at Nic.

"Put that away. I've brought the good stuff." Gabriel's voice rumbled down the hallway. Nic and everyone else stood out of respect for the man that had single-handedly built Guardian Security.

“Shit! Look at that, you have clones!” Jacob said exactly what Nic was thinking. Two men flanked Gabriel, and the resemblance was uncanny. They were a couple inches taller than Gabriel, but they’d definitely swum in the same gene pool. Dark hair, the same color eyes, and built like brick houses. The only difference was they lacked the gray hair and lines that life had carved into Gabriel’s face.

“I do. Deacon,” Gabriel nodded to the one on the right who held two small boxes and then indicated the man on the left carrying three dark colored bottles, “and Ronan. My sons. And we come bearing gifts. Two boxes of Cohiba Behike and three bottles of the best Cuban rum money can buy. Merry Christmas, and happy bachelor party, Nic.” Gabriel strode forward as he spoke and clasped Nic’s outstretched hand before he pulled him in for a hug. He whispered in Nic’s ear, “Congratulations and good luck with that one. She’s a bit crazy.”

Nic laughed as Gabriel pulled away. “Her crazy makes me happy.”

“Her crazy scares the fuck out of me.” Jared’s comment resulted in a surprisingly sober chorus of ‘here, here.’

“Don’t let me stop the party. I’m heading back to the ranch house. The wife and daughters are waiting.”

“Daughters?” The echo from most of the men earned a laugh from Gabriel and his sons.

“Yes, daughters, and yes, I waited until all of you were off the market before I brought them around. As much as I love you crazy motherfuckers, I wouldn’t let you anywhere near my girls while you were single.” Gabriel slapped Jason on the shoulder. “Need to talk with you for a minute.” Jason fell into step behind Gabriel, leaving his sons still holding the cigars and liquor.

“Well, I guess that is permission to drink some of this.” Ronan headed toward the bar and Deacon followed, setting the boxes of cigars on the exam table.

“No, I’ve got to draw the line. No smoking in the clinic.” Doc objected as the men descended on the Cuban cigars.

“But Doc, these are Cohiba Behikes. Damn near \$20K per box. We have to smoke them.” Zane picked one up and sniffed along the barrel of the cigar. “It is freezing outside. Don’t make me freeze my balls off to enjoy a bit of paradise.”

Drake cleared his throat and gave Zane a look. The man glanced at everyone in the room. He singled out Gabriel’s twins. “You two have a security clearance?”

“Sure, vetted by the Air Force and before that by Dad.” Ronan grabbed a tumbler and added three fingers of rum to it before handing it to his brother and pouring another for himself.

His brother, Deacon, grabbed two cigars. “If you have a place to smoke these that won’t freeze our family jewels, I can guarantee neither of us will see a fucking thing, and if we do see it, we’ll suffer from a severe case of permanent selective memory loss.” He tossed a cigar to his brother, stuck the Cohiba in his mouth and reached into his jacket pocket. “Besides, we have the cigar clippers and lighter.” He waived them both at Zane.

“Fuck.”

Zane palmed his face and glanced at Drake who shrugged. “Nobody down there now.”

“Okay, but if anyone says shit, my portion of the organization is going to come calling. Got that?” Zane looked at each of the brothers.

Their ‘eat shit and die’ expressions told Nic they weren’t impressed by the threat of a visit by a Shadow. Nic, however, had a healthy respect for those operatives. He wouldn’t say shit to any of them.

“And exactly what portion of the organization do you oversee?” Deacon asked.

“The Shadow Division.” Zane nailed the twins with a stare.

Nic saw the recognition in their expressions. From that reaction, their father had vetted them and had told them about the organization, at least the structure.

“Dude, I will never speak of this night.” Ronan grabbed a bottle and passed it to Deacon.

“What night?” Deacon asked.

Zane stared them down for a hot minute. “Good enough.” He extended his hand and then dropped it when he realized the twins were packed for traveling and their hands were full. “I’m Zane.” He pointed to each man in the room and introduced them. “That is Jacob, Justin, Jared, Joseph, I believe you’ve met Jason, the walking mountain that just left. The dude getting hitched tomorrow is Nic. Next to him is Adam, and that guy is Drake.”

“Fuck, somebody have a J fetish?” Ronan tossed out as they all started to walk toward the back of the clinic.

“Something like that.” Behind them, Jason’s voice echoed down the hallway. “Where are we going?”

“To the labyrinth. Fucking Doc went all medical on our asses and won’t let us smoke in the clinic.” Drake’s voice came from the front of the gaggle. Nic chuckled to himself. What a fucking stream of unlikely friends it was. *Assassins and mercenaries and cops, oh my*. Well, not technically mercenaries, but fuck that was funny. His mind played it over again, and he laughed out loud. Fuck, he really didn’t need any more alcohol.

Jason laughed. “Nic, you’re drunk, and shame on you, Doc, for having standards.”

“I know right? What was I thinking?” Doc quipped.

“Damn good thing you’re my best friend or I’d have to hate you for being a stick in the mud.” Jacob slung his arm around Doc’s neck and pulled him in for a sideways hug.

Doc ducked out of the stranglehold. “Love you too, man.”

Drake stopped the procession and blocked a keypad with his body as he entered a code. He opened a door.

“You have an alarm on a fucking supply closet.” Justin laughed.

“Wrong again, twinkle toes.” Joseph’s evil laugh echoed as the back shelf opened and a steel door appeared. Drake entered another code, and the massive door to the underground system opened.

“Twinkle toes? Really? What the fuck?” Justin pushed Joseph’s shoulder, and the man laughed again.

“You’re the cat burglar.” Joseph pushed Justin through the door before him.

“High-value information extraction specialist.” Justin’s retort was met with laughter and catcalls that echoed around them as they descended.

Nic took in the long flight of stairs. He held his glass in one hand and the rail with the other. Stairs were not his friend on a good day. When he was drunk, shit could get ugly. Nobody behind him seemed to mind that he took his time and for that he was thankful. His half-pickled mind wondered if there was an elevator somewhere. Or, he could crawl up the stairs. That was always an option. Of course, Jared would... *holy fuck!*

“Son of a bitch!” Jacob muttered.

Joseph gave a low whistle. “Been busy, D.”

Drake turned and smiled at the group. “May I present Labyrinth Alpha. A series of apartments run down this hallway. That hallway leads to the flight line. We are about halfway done with that. This hallway leads to the Comm facility, gym and chow hall. The stairway you came down, of course, leads to the clinic.”

“It’s a fucking underground living facility.” That came from Ronan.

“It is made for our assets that need to remain anonymous.” Jason acknowledged. “The facility above ground that Kaeden and Zane use during normal operations is an entry point to the offices below ground. We have weapons vaults and IT, secure comms.”

“The air filtration system vents out by the windmills and the ductwork is camouflaged so no one would be able to recognize it for what it is.”

“What it is, is fucking impressive,” Nic said as he took in the area. The room where they were standing was basic and utilitarian, but it had couches and chairs. A television, movies on DVD, and game consoles lined a built-in shelving unit. Fuck, he could spend some time in this place and never miss the daylight.

“Well then, let’s get this party started!” Jacob slapped Deacon on the back and stuck his hand out. “Clippers, lighter and pop that rum open, son. We have a bachelor to send off tonight!”

Nic sent a worried glance at Jared. “What have I gotten myself into?”

“Fuck if I know. I can’t remember most of the last party we had. Just be prepared to be hungover in the morning.”

“Dude, I’m getting married at noon. I can’t be hungover.”

Doc grabbed his tumbler from his hand. “That’s right. Medically speaking it would be wrong of me to recommend you still be drunk when you get married, but as a friend... be drunk. Save the hangover for another day.” The refilled glass was shoved back in his hand along with a cigar.

“A toast, to Nic, a man with a set of brass balls. He’s marrying Jade, and nobody is putting a shotgun to his head. He is either head-over-heels in love, or he is the stupidest son of a bitch on the planet.”

A litany of ‘here, here,’ and ‘to Nic’ bounced around the underground room. Nic lifted his glass and took a drink. The rum was smooth and mellow and went down way too easy. He glanced at the men in the room with him. Damn good thing Jade was the understanding type. Yeah... not.

He closed his eyes and shook his head as another toast rang out. He was so fucked.

CHAPTER 14

Jade supposed she'd been more nervous in her past, like when Nic was in the hospital, but today was running a close second. She glanced at the wall clock in the family room where she'd been waiting for her fiancé. One hour. One hour until "go time" and he still hadn't made an appearance. She strode into the kitchen. Maybe Nic had stopped for something to eat? Maybe? Fuck, she was out of reasons he was late and out of patience, too. She hit the swinging door to the kitchen and walked into a sorry scene of painfully hungover men... Jacob, Jason, Joseph and Justin... but no Nic. "Where's Nic? We gotta go."

"Hey, Jade." Jacob croaked then cleared his throat. He scratched his head and turned a deeper shade of puce. "Um... we... ah... yeah... we lost him."

She blinked in disbelief. "I'm sorry could you repeat those fucking words? It sounded to me like you lost my fucking fiancé?" She glanced around to make sure her mother wasn't in the vicinity.

Jared and Jacob looked like they wanted to barf rather than look at her, so she pinned her gaze on Jason. "What the fuck?"

"We were all together. Everyone was having a good time. Ronan challenged me to a video game. When we finished—"

"How long?"

"Only a couple of hours."

Jade stomped her foot. "No, dammit! How long has he been gone?"

“The last time anyone remembers seeing him was after the last bottle of rum.” Justin mumbled. He was sitting-slash-laying on the kitchen table. From his shoulders forward he sprawled over the flat surface, head down. His eyes were closed, and his mouth squished on one side when he rolled his face toward her to speak.

“It is fucking freezing outside.” Jade ran her hands through her hair and grabbed it, pulling it hard.

“Jade, we know he isn’t outside.” Jason’s calm put a match to her fuse.

“How the fuck do you know that, Jace?” Okay, so that may have been a screech, and from the grimaces of her hungover brothers, it was loud, too.

“Shhh...”

“Do not tell me to be quiet. How the fuck do you know he’s not out there frozen?”

“Because it snowed last night. I watched Gabriel walk over here. By the time he got to the ranch house, his tracks were filled with snow. There wasn’t a single new track outside.” Jason’s calm, logical explanation didn’t help in the slightest.

She squeezed her eyes together and lifted her hands out in front of her, fisting them tightly, trying to contain the emotion that flew through her faster than atoms colliding. “So, you’re telling me you lost Nic in the clinic.” She’d lowered her voice to a whisper, and her eyes opened with deadly intent. She made sure she impaled each of her brothers who weren’t asleep with her lethal stare, not even sparing Joseph, who had yet to speak. “What is this? A fucking joke?”

“No.” Joseph leaned away from the counter. “We wouldn’t do that, and you know it. Nic is in the labyrinth which has been built under the complex. Drake and Zane are looking for him. We’ll find him. It is just a matter of checking. Jacob, Jason and I have to go to Jasmine’s with Mom to help Chad with the kids. Jared and Justin are going to help Drake and Zane. We’ve even recruited Adam and Gabriel’s sons to help.

Everyone else is trying to look normal so Mom won't find out about your secret."

Jade shook her head in utter disbelief. She pointed at Jared and then nudged Justin, waking him up. "You two find him. You get him in his fucking suit, and you get him to the church by eleven. If you don't, I swear I will make your lives miserable in ways you cannot imagine." She could hear her mother talking in the great room. "Go!"

Jared started to stagger out the door. "Take him with you!" she hissed and pointed to Justin who was now drooling, open mouthed, on the table.

Jared sloshed over to the table, thumped his brother on the forehead with a flick of his fingers and helped the man stand. "Oh, damn... Jared... I don't feel so good." Justin leaned against him as they headed out the door.

"Join the crowd," Jacob mumbled.

Jade scrubbed her face. "They'll find him, right?"

Jason nodded. "The place isn't finished. There are a lot of off-shoots and areas where he could have ended up. We didn't want to worry you, but..."

Jade nodded. "Yeah, thanks for that. Just, find a way to let me know. Okay?"

Jason nodded once and turned his head toward the kitchen door. It swung open bringing her mother and Anna, Gabriel's wife. Two beautiful women trailed behind them, sisters by the look of them.

"Ah, here is a cluster of my children. Anna, you know Jason, Jacob, and Jade. This is my oldest son, Joseph. Everyone, these are Anna's daughters, Gabriella and Charlotte."

Jade smiled, or at least she thought she did. "It is nice to meet you."

The younger women sized up her brothers.

Jade turned to the men, "Your wives will be looking for you. I'll help Mom cook breakfast. We are having bacon and

eggs. I'm in the mood for some sunny-side-up this morning." Jacob grimaced and she mentally licked a finger and placed a mark on her new revenge tally board. She was going to get back at her brothers for losing her fiancé. The man had better be at the church by eleven, or hell would have several new inmates.

Jade bounced on her toes at the end of the aisle and then walked it again. She'd taken off her heels about ten minutes ago.

"He'll be here." Jasmine's voice carried in the empty sanctuary.

Jade spun on the ball of her foot and growled like a mad dog. A rabid bitch. Yup, that was her right now. She'd surpassed pissed and was working on a full-blown, category 5 rage. "Has anyone heard from the men?" She glanced at the wives and fiancée sitting in the front pew. All of them shook their heads. "What time is it?"

"Three minutes since the last time you asked." Tori leaned back and leveled a stare at her. "They have time."

"Everyone will be starting to arrive in ten minutes. What are we going to do if they don't get here?" Jade threw up her hands. "Oh, sorry everyone, it was a big joke!"

Jasmine lifted her hand. "No. We remove the altar flowers and Chad sings Christmas carols. I've written down the page numbers in the hymnal for them and Chad has his guitar."

Jade glared at her, "When did you come up with that plan?"

"The minute Jason told me what was up." Jasmine's eyes softened, and she smiled. "They will be here. Your brothers and your fiancé will move heaven and earth for you. You know this."

Faith's attention turned toward the back of the church and the narthex. "I heard..."

The doors opened, and seven men piled through the doors. Jade sprinted down the aisle and slammed into Nic. As soon as his arms enveloped her, she sobbed, “You asshole!”

He cradled her in his arms holding her tightly. “I’m sorry, babe. I got hungry and went exploring for food. The next thing I know Zane is slapping my face.”

“He’d fallen asleep behind the stairs. We’d passed by him at least ten times before Zane thought to look back there.” Jason provided the details.

“What are you wearing?” Jade pulled on the bowtie Nic wore and laughed at the Christmas-colored velvet. Her hand cupped his chin.

“I wanted to be festive. How did I do?”

“You look sexy.” Jade leaned into him. “You scared the fuck out of me.”

“I know. I’m sorry, babe. It wasn’t intentional.” His warm lips brushed her forehead.

She peeked up at him, narrowed her eyes and spoke slowly because she needed him to understand her words. “You don’t party with them anymore. You’re in adult time out.”

Nic laughed, the vibration of his chest rumbled through her. “Yeah, what does that consist of?”

“Me and you, alone, for at least a month.” Jade lifted onto her toes and whispered in his ear. “I’m going to teach you a lesson about making me worry.”

“Everyone, there are cars pulling up. Jade get back here. You guys, too. We can’t let anyone see you.” At Ember’s excited words, Nic pulled away from her.

Jade grabbed Nic’s hand, because there was no way she was letting him out of her sight. She did a double take when she saw Gabriel, but headed toward the side rooms. As soon as the door shut behind them, she doubled up her fist and hit Nic on the shoulder. “That is for worrying me half to death.”

Nic rubbed his arm. “I deserved that.”

“I slugged Joseph in the chin for messing with my mind. You could do better.” Em’s chiding remark made the entire room erupt with laughter.

Dani looked around the room. “Ah, Jade? Who’s walking you down the aisle?”

“Oh, fuck! How could we forget that?” She twisted in Nic’s arms. “I have to find Frank.”

“I’ll do it.” Jared worked his way through the tight confines of fourteen people gathered into a room made for far less. He opened the door a crack and closed it again—quickly.

“Is that one of your super-sleuth cop moves?” Christian teased quietly.

“No. That’s my ‘Mom and Frank are in the narthex six feet away’ move,” Jared whispered and winked at his husband. He opened the door again and then quickly ducked out.

“I have never had so much fun at a wedding.” Gabriel chuckled. “Thanks for asking me to stand with you, Nic.”

“I’m honored, sir. You took a chance on a D.C. cop with an attitude.” Nic smiled. “And gave me a family.”

“We are that.” Gabriel agreed. His eyes traveled over everyone in the room. “I know I don’t say it enough, but you are as much my family as those children sitting in the pews. We’ve been through hell and back together, and it doesn’t look like it will be getting easier. I’m honored to be a part of your lives.”

“Dammit, now I’m going to cry.” Jade pulled her bottom lip into her mouth and bit it to stop the tears that threatened.

Jared ducked back in. “Okay. Frank will wait until the music starts and then he’ll excuse himself and come back here. I rushed everyone else into the sanctuary. Everyone is sitting down. Are we ready?”

Jade stepped back from Nic and looked up into his eyes. “Are you? Ready to be saddled with me for the rest of your life?”

“Absolutely. I love you.”

“Awww... isn’t that sweet?” Jacob teased and got an audible smack from Tori for his efforts.

“There’s the music,” Dani whispered in a rush of excitement. Jade had asked Chad to play Christmas carols on the guitar for the processional. Haunting and beautiful, the soft guitar sounds of ‘*O Little Town of Bethlehem*’ filtered into the room.

“Okay, gentleman, grab a woman. If you’re married to her, by default that is the woman you’re escorting down the aisle. Christian, you’re escorting Dani, Jared you have Ember and Gabriel, I’m with you.” Jasmine spun around and hugged Jade. “See you in a couple of minutes.” She pointed at Nic. “You take the side door and wait until we are all at the altar before you come out. The minister will meet you there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Nic laughed. “Damn, she’d be a good drill sergeant.”

“Damn straight!” Jared laughed and opened the door. “Okay, Frank is waiting, and the sanctuary doors are closed.”

“That’s my cue.” Nic squeezed her arms and dropped a kiss on her lips before he darted out the door and across the small area to the enclosed hall that led to the front of the sanctuary.

The others filed out and paired up. Jade waited for Frank as close to the side room as she could get, not wanting anyone to be able to see her when they looked back at the other couples walking down the aisle.

“I’m sorry I didn’t ask you sooner, Frank.” Jade blinked back tears that she was absolutely pissed at. Damn tears.

“Sweetheart, you’ve had a rough couple weeks. I’m honored you asked me.”

Confusion swamped her. “Why wouldn’t I ask you? I’ve considered you my dad since the moment you married Mom.” She saw her stepfather’s eyes mist over and shook her head. “No!” She whispered. “No, dammit, you do not have permission to get emotional, Frank Marshall. If you cry, I’ll cry, and I’m not crying!”

Frank nodded his chin. "I love you, too." He leaned over and kissed her cheek as Chad's guitar music strummed out the bridal march. "Let's get you married and give your momma a surprise."

"You don't think she knows?"

"Considering our family just marched to the front of the church. Safe bet she's figured out something is happening." Frank nodded toward the sanctuary. "One foot in front of the other, my daughter. One foot in front of the other."

Okay. She could do that. Jade took a deep breath and wrapped her arm through Frank's. It was time.

CHAPTER 15

Nic stood quietly in the wings of the old church. He and the minister had exchanged a few words. It was awkward, at least for Nic. They quieted to wait for the music to change. His hands were damp. Fuck, he'd been through one hell of a lot in his life but the big things... losing his mom, his leg... if it hadn't been for Jade, he doubted he'd still be a functioning member of society. The woman had been his touchstone in a miasma of lost perspective, misery, self-doubt and depression so damn strong it almost pulled him into its black depths. Jade's will had prevented it. Her determination had pulled him out of that abyss.

Nic tensed when the Christmas carols stopped and the guitar music announced the beginning of the ceremony. Nic watched, unseen, as Jade's mom stood with the rest of the church. At the murmured voices, she turned her head. It took several seconds before she realized what was happening. Amanda's hand rose to her mouth as she watched each couple walk in and split at the altar. He could see realization hit her when Dani walked in on Christian's arm. Amanda turned around and lifted on her tiptoes to see above the people blocking her view.

Chad smiled and changed music once again. Nic followed the minister out and took his place. Amanda glanced back at him. Tears streamed down her face unabated. The rest of the people, people he knew and some he loved, turned to watch his future wife walk down the aisle. Chad sang while he played. Nic was sure he recognized the song, but the need to

identify the title fled his brain when Jade and Frank appeared at the end of that five-mile-long aisle. He locked his knee and forgot to breathe until Jared nudged him. Air burst into his lungs and a smile he couldn't prevent blazed across his face.

Frank kissed Jade's cheek, and Nic reached out his hand, giving her assistance up the stairs. She joined him on the dais and turned to him. Nic lowered and swept his lips against hers. Laughter rippled through the church.

"Well, now that we have that out of the way, maybe we should marry these two." The minister's comments registered, and Nic felt Jade's laughter under his kiss. He lifted away but kept his focus on the woman of his dreams.

The minister spoke about the sanctity of marriage and delivered a message of love and caring, although Nic would never be able to recall the exact words. His mind was fixed firmly on the woman beside him. At his name, he blinked.

"Nic and Jasmine, no Jewell... I mean *Jade*... I'm sorry, all these J names give me a fit." The minister's face reddened to rival a beet. He closed the bible in his hands and laughed. "Ladies and gentlemen, the bride and groom have written their own vows."

He turned to Nic and nodded. Nic drew a steadying breath and smiled. "Jade, when you seduced me—" Jade's eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. Her eyes slid toward her mother without her moving her head. The entire wedding party snickered, and there were several laughs from those in attendance. Nic chuckled along and continued, "You changed me. In an instant, my world was filled with life-sustaining warmth. You are epically outrageous, fantastically uninhibited, and one hundred percent what I need to exist. I know life with you will never be boring, nor will it be easy, but I don't want boring or easy. I want the hair-raising, unbelievable adventure that surrounds you, and I am profoundly grateful to be the recipient of the love you try to hide. You are the love of my life, and I'm honored that you chose me." Nic turned and extended his hand to Jared for the ring.

Jared gave a startled jump and patted his pockets. Soft laughs echoed until Jared smiled with relief and reached in his front pocket. He pulled out Jade's wedding ring, a diamond encrusted band with stones cut to match her engagement ring. Nic grabbed the small ring and turned at the same time Jade was moving to give her bouquet to Jasmine. The flowers caught the ring and flicked it down the aisle where it rolled under the front pew. Everyone in the front pew ducked, looking between their feet.

"I'll give twenty bucks to the first kid who finds that ring." At Jade's words, Talon, Reece, Tristan, Tanner, Elizabeth, and Kadey disappeared. Squeals of laughter from the children mixed with the unabated laughter of those who had to lift their feet as the kids scurried under and around the pews.

"Got it!" Reece stood, lifting the ring in his hand.

"Excellent, bring it here, dude." Jade waved him up. Reese gave her the ring before Nic could grab it. "Oh, no, you owe little dude here twenty bucks." Jade shoved the ring onto her finger and held it up, winking at the crowd.

Nic reached into his suit pocket pulled out his wallet and lifted the bills he had inside. "I only have a fifty."

Jade plucked the bill from his hand and gave it to Reece. "That's a tip."

The minister lifted his hands trying to still the laughter that echoed through the sanctuary. When it finally quieted he took a deep breath, closed his eyes and sighed dramatically before he blinked his eyes open and looked at Jade. "Your turn."

"Ah." Jade turned to Nic and winked. She pivoted towards the people in attendance. "I'm Jade, by the way. I'm the one marrying Nic. It is my name on the marriage license, so I figure the reverend's botching my name isn't that big of a deal. As for you." The laughter the minister had tried to quell returned. She turned to Nic and lifted her hand pointing at him. "You told my mom I seduced you. She could have lived her entire life without knowing that." She glanced at her mom. "Right?"

Amanda, laughing behind her hand, nodded and waved Jade back to Nic. “See? You know you are an amazing man, Nicolas DeMarco, and it is a good thing you’re so damn pretty, otherwise...” Nic threw back his head and laughed at the standing joke between them. “But, I’d like to be serious for about thirty seconds.” Jade took both of his hands in hers. He waited until she lifted her eyes to his and his breath caught in his throat. The pure emotion that showed in her eyes was a rare gift. “You, Nic, are my beacon of sanity. You ground my life and give it meaning and purpose. Before you, there wasn’t depth, or connection, or the desire for either. You split my soul open and gave it a place to reform, whole and alive with hope. You are the foundation I needed, the love I didn’t deserve, and the man I will cherish and adore until my last breath.”

She turned to Jewell who had his ring. Every last kid in attendance jumped up. Jade turned to them and lifted an eyebrow.

“Awww... come on, Aunt Jade! I wanna chance!” Talon begged.

“How much money you got in that wallet, DeMarco?” Jade glanced at his wedding ring. The devil danced in her eyes, and that absolute joy and impetuosity was the reason he loved her more than life itself. He glanced from Jade to the minister. The man glowered at him and shook his head.

Nic didn’t fight the smile that split his face. “More than enough.” He grabbed his wedding band and flicked it down the aisle.

CHAPTER 16

Jared leaned against the rail and surveyed the majority of the great room below him. Christmas Eve with his mom and Frank had always been magical. This Christmas was no exception. The wedding was exactly like Jade. Fun, quirky and completely inappropriate. Mom had cried and laughed and then cried again.

“Are you ready?” Christian came up behind him and planted his chin on Jared’s shoulder, looking down into the great room.

“I am. Is everything all right?” Jared lifted his arm and Christian ducked under it into his side-armed hug.

“She’s fine. Just wanted to wish us a Merry Christmas.” Christian dropped his head and sighed. “She scared me with the text though. The first trimester is the hardest.”

“It will be okay this time.” They’d done their research before they sought out a surrogate. Clara was ten weeks pregnant, for the second time. The first attempt ended in a miscarriage. They waited a year before they tried again. They’d chosen not to know whose sperm was used to inseminate her. Whether his or Christian’s, their baby would be loved. “When do you want to tell them?” Laughter rose from the family below.

“When we are sure.”

Christian’s deep rumble of laughter followed Jade chasing Jacob through the room, which set off a string of children in

hot pursuit. “Those two aren’t right in the head, are they?”

“God, no.” Jared glanced up and smiled. *Mistletoe*. He swung his husband around and folded him into his arms. “This time next year, you’ll be a daddy.”

Christian leaned into him, his long blond hair fell over Jared’s hands. “And so will you. Are you ready for that type of craziness?” He nodded down at the family below.

Jared brought his husband’s attention back to him using his finger and thumb to trap Christian’s chin. “More than ready.” He lowered his lips to his husband’s. “Our first kiss was here.” Christian blinked up at the mistletoe and smiled. He recalled their first kiss like it was yesterday.

Jared smiled but didn’t say a word as he reached toward Christian. Surprise froze him for a moment. The warm grip of Jared’s large palm cupped the back of his neck. Jared made a point of looking up, and Christian’s eyes followed his gaze. A bundle of mistletoe hung suspended over them. Christian stopped breathing as Jared leaned down to meet his lips. The soft brush sent a shockwave of sensation running like tiny electric currents under his skin. The sweep of Jared’s tongue asked for permission, and Christian granted access. He grabbed Jared’s biceps to steady himself under the sensual onslaught. The huge muscles flinched and trembled under his touch.

His body was being set on fire. Jared’s tongue coaxed and teased his until Christian leaned into the big body in front of him, surrendering to the longing he felt.

The kiss ended with a tender nip of his bottom lip followed by a soft sweep of Jared’s tongue. Christian opened his eyes to see the pupils of Jared’s eyes blown wide, rimmed by a slice of vivid green. Jared’s stare held him mesmerized.

“Merry Christmas, Christian. May all your dreams come true.” Jared pulled back a step as he spoke.

“I think they just did.” Jared leaned down for a kiss and as their lips met, he repeated the words, “Merry Christmas, my love. May all your dreams come true.” It was as if the first kiss

echoed through the years they'd been together and resonated in the life they'd built with each other.

When they separated, Christian confessed, "Every one has come true because of you."

"Hey, you two! Come down here, we are going to cut our one and only wedding cake!" Jade's words brought a smile to both of their lips but didn't stop the kiss. "Kids, go get your uncles so I can eat some of this cake!"

Jared pulled away from Christian. "Want to make this fun?"

"How?"

"Run." Jared spun and sprinted toward the back stairs with Christian right behind him. The squeal of children thundering up the stairs echoed after them. Jared grabbed Christian's hand, and they flew down the stairs, ducking into a huge hall closet. He shut the door and listened as the children thundered by.

"They'll figure it out," Christian whispered.

"Don't care. I just needed a minute." Jared pulled his husband back into his arms.

"Only one?" Christian wrapped his arms around Jared.

"No, there will never be enough minutes with you." Christian met Jared's lips once again, ignoring the outside distractions.

Amanda Marshall pulled her coat on and slipped out onto the front porch. She flipped the switch starting the outdoor heater and moved over to the swing. Night had fallen, and the children and grandchildren were in their rooms resting or getting ready for Christmas Eve dinner. Betty had banished her from the kitchen. She was at loose ends, which was unexpected. She tucked her legs up in the swing with her. The warmth of the heater was immediate. Amanda stared out into the night. The wedding and reception had been a complete surprise. Watching her family come down the aisle, she knew

it was either Justin or Jade and her bet had been on Justin until she'd seen Dani. Jade getting married was something she'd always prayed for, but she knew her daughter, and if anyone had pushed her, she would have pushed back and run the other way.

A smile snuck across her face. Jade's wedding was untraditional, to say the least. An organized three-ring circus was an apt description. The hug she'd given her daughter after they finally found Nic's ring and the minister had pronounced them husband and wife, was one she would always remember.

"Did we surprise you?" Jade almost bounced in her high heels when she asked.

"You did. I had no idea what was going on." Amanda glanced up at Nic. "So, she seduced you, huh?"

"I am so going to kill you for that Nicolas DeMarco." Jade flicked his shoulder with her flowers.

"Hey, we are in a church, I can't lie. It's like, against the laws of physics or something." Nic laughed and ducked away from the poor, abused flowers when they swung his way again.

"Well at least God didn't strike us down with lightning." Jade turned back to Amanda and glanced up at the sanctuary ceiling. "That was a very real possibility, you know what I mean?"

Amanda grabbed her daughter's hand. "I don't think God actually strikes down people anymore and if he did, he wouldn't take you two." She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her daughter's ear. "I know He loves you for who you are because it is impossible not to. You are an amazing person, Jade, and you deserve this man's love." She grabbed Nic's hand and put it on top of Jade's. Trying hard not to cry, she glanced up at Nic. "You two deserve all the happiness the world has to offer. Make sure you take time to find it, together. Don't let life pass you by."

"Dammit, Momma, you can't cry." Jade stomped her foot and wiped at her own cheeks. "All day, Mom. All day without losing it, and now I ruin my mascara."

The door squeaked as it opened, and Frank stepped out after her. He had a blanket in his hands and was wearing his old Carhartt jacket. It had seen a few too many winters, but Frank still wore it; he just added a down vest under it. She had a new one under the Christmas tree for him. The man would spend a fortune on the ranch, or her or their family, but not a dime on himself. He was one of the best men she'd ever known.

He sat down and tucked them under the blanket together. His arm went around her as he leaned back. "Good?"

She hummed in agreement and lowered her head to his shoulder. "That was the most unorthodox wedding I've ever seen."

Frank chuckled. His laughter made her head dance as she relaxed into him. "That girl is a wild-child."

"Always has been." Amanda agreed. "The little kids won't be able to sleep tonight. There is nothing left of that cake."

"They'll crash after we get some good warm food into their bellies. They've been playing hard." Frank pushed the swing gently, and they swayed, listening to random laughter and doors opening and closing inside the house.

"Did you ever think your life would be this full?" Sometimes she worried that the entirety of the family was too much for Frank. They'd marched into his life and turned it upside down.

"I didn't," Frank responded. He pushed the swing again. "But then again, when I thought that, I reckoned I'd lost Tori. Jacob brought her back to me. Keelee found her man because of him and then I found you. Never believed after Elizabeth died that I'd have this." He tugged her closer and kissed her hair. "Wouldn't trade a single, noisy, messy, quirky day for what I had before."

"I overheard you and Gabriel this morning." She had to confess the worry that was on her heart, and she hadn't meant to eavesdrop. The men were speaking on the porch, and she was in the laundry room loading sheets that hadn't made it

through the night into the washer. Overactive bladders of young ones tended to mean more laundry. The window in the laundry was always left open an inch or two because it was unbearably hot otherwise. The men's voices floated in. The words froze her to the spot. It wasn't intentional until it became essential.

Frank sighed. "How much?"

"Enough to worry." She shivered, and it had nothing to do with the fact they were outside.

Frank grunted and kicked the porch deck with his boot sending them swaying again. "No sense borrowing trouble. Worry about what we know is happening, not what we think will."

"Dixon, Chief, and Taty." Amanda sighed and closed her eyes. "I miss them."

"They are safe." Frank's chest rumbled under her ear.

"For now." Amanda reminded him.

Frank shrugged. "It is the best we can do." A loud squeal peeled through the house prompting a chuckle from both of them. "Are you ready for tomorrow morning?"

"I am. Presents are all wrapped. Santa Frank has midnight delivery duty, and every child in that house knows not to leave their room until after six a.m."

"Graaaaaammmmmaaaa!" Talon's loud call could be heard clearly outside.

"Think that mandate is going to work?" Frank pulled off the blanket and stood, extending his hand to her.

She took his hand and stood up, albeit a bit slowly. The cold and age had taken their toll today, although the joy in her heart knew no such limitations. It leaped and danced in a robust salute to her family and her life in general. Another long wailing call from inside the house tickled laughter from both of them.

Amanda leaned up and kissed Frank on the jaw. "Not a chance."

CHAPTER 17

Jade hung up the white lace dress and slipped into a naughty Santa teddy. The red fishnet thigh-highs plus the four-inch patent red leather stilettos she was wearing were accented by a white fur garter and a red velvet Santa hat with a white fur brim and a ball at the end. She added matching lipstick and took in the overall effect. Hell, she'd do her. That thought made her laugh out loud.

“What are you doing in there?” Nic called to her. She'd helped him take off his prosthesis before changing. He'd been on his leg all day after sleeping with the prosthesis strapped on last night. His scarred skin was tender and swollen, so she'd been careful to make sure he'd taken care of himself before she'd changed.

She opened the door a little bit and swung her leg out, hiding her body. Nic's muttered, *holy fuck*, was all she needed to hear.

She put her leg down and stepped out from behind the door. “Have you been a good boy, Nicolas?” She sauntered over to the bed. The pup tent developing under the sheet her husband had draped over his body was obvious. She turned around and ran her hand from her thigh up to her hip. “Oh, look!” She pointed to her shoe. “The ankle strap isn't fastened.” She spread her legs and bent at the waist. The lace material of the teddy pulled tight between her butt cheeks, becoming for all practical purposes a thong. It took several long seconds to run the strap of leather through the stay. Jade

lifted back up and peeked at the man over her shoulder. “Well, have you been a good boy?”

“Oh, fuck yeah. I’ve been fantastic.” Nic sat up in bed. The sheet slithered down his body, and Jade sucked in a breath. What the man did to her should be illegal. He extended his hand to her, and she turned without question to take it. He helped her onto the bed where she straddled him. His hand slid up her thigh to the fur garter. He glanced at it before his eyes darted back to hers. “What do good boys get for Christmas?”

Jade pushed him on the shoulder until he got the message and relaxed back onto the mattress. She moved over him, kissed his shoulder and whispered, “A little sugar.” She trailed kisses down his chest following his happy trail, moving the sheets as they impeded her goal. “A little spice.” She cupped his balls and shot an impish look up at him when he spread his legs to allow her to fit between them. “And a whole lot of everything nice.”

Jade took his cock to the back of her throat and closed her lips around the shaft, milking him on the way up. Her hand rolled his balls, and the man arched off the bed. Fuck, she’d never get enough of making her man lose his shit. *She* did that. No one else. There would never be another woman with her man. They were bound together, forever.

Jade lowered again, and the fur ball from her Santa hat flipped into her eyes. She grabbed the hat from her head and tossed it to the side as she took him again, but this time swallowed when he hit the back of her throat.

“Fuck, babe. Stop, please. I need to be inside you.” Nic grabbed her by the arms and pulled her up his body.

Jade lay on him, arching her back to look down at the expression on his face. His eyes were hooded, heavy, and full of emotion. She saw love and lust and happiness, all of which she reflected right back to him.

“I love you.” The simple admission wasn’t difficult anymore. They’d made a pact. They would embrace each day and live it to the fullest. There would be no regrets for them. They were a team, and together they could face anything.

He pushed her hair away from her face and cupped her neck with his hand. “I love you, Mrs. DeMarco.”

Jade smiled and shook her head. “Mrs. King-DeMarco.”

Nic smiled and pulled her down, whispering against her lips. “I don’t care what you call yourself as long as you know you’re mine.”

Jade lost herself in the kiss. His tongue danced with hers. The man could put her on the edge of orgasm just by kissing her. He consumed her and yet filled her. His kiss both gave of himself and claimed her. The exchange gave as much as it took, and the perfection of their union was based on those gives and takes. It was never about her or him but about them. Learning, moving forward, and making mistakes—but always together.

Nic rolled her and deftly unfastened the lace of her teddy after running his fingers up her red, fishnet, thigh-high stockings. Her heels planted on the mattress. He moved over her and centered himself. “You are the most extraordinary woman I’ve ever known.” He thrust forward, and Jade arched into his movement. “Fuck, so perfect,” Nic whispered as he crushed her to his chest. They were pressed together from forehead to hip, her legs wrapped around his thighs and her high heels pressed in, encouraging him to thrust deeper.

“More.” The word was on repeat in her mind. He knew how to move to make her insane. Jade slid her arms around him and clung to his broad back with gripping fingers that dimpled his flesh. He seized her lips in a kiss that left them both breathless. They barely broke apart to breathe, taking and giving air from and to each other. Jade gasped when he rotated his hips. His smile against her lips was as natural as their lovemaking. He knew how to touch her soul. He thrust again, and she moaned. “I’ve got you, babe. Let go.”

His words stripped away the fortress she built around herself. It crumbled as she crested in orgasm the way it always did because Jade trusted his love. She held him as he reached his own release and held him as he trembled.

She stroked his hair. “You do have me, for now and forever.”

CHAPTER 18

Drake held Jillian on his lap. The couches were overrun with adults. The children were playing with boxes and hiding under huge sheets of wrapping paper and slowly migrating out of the immediate area. The presents that weren't being played with were stacked carefully in individual piles by the tree. When he and Dixon had moved to the Marshall ranch, Christmas had taken on a new meaning for them. Extended family had taken on a new importance. He'd never had this growing up. It was the environment he wanted his and Jillian's family to know.

Jillian laid her head down on his shoulder. "I'm glad Dad and Matt know the truth. Thank you for making sure they were told."

Drake dropped a kiss on her forehead. It was difficult for her being away from Cliff and Matt, but necessity dictated she stay hidden on the ranch. He glanced at his Skipper and friend. The man had moved mountains to make sure Jillian's family knew she hadn't perished in the staged fire.

"Have you heard from Dixon?" Jade and Nic sat beside them. Jade slipped to the floor between Nic's legs. She glanced up at Drake waiting for an answer.

"A couple weeks ago. He called. Said he was managing." Drake noticed the entire room had stilled at the mention of his brother's name.

"After he spoke with you, Dixon called me." Jason dropped his arm around Faith as he sat back on the couch.

Blake and Tristan were the only children in the room, and they were inside a spaceship camouflaged as a thick, cardboard, packing box.

“When are we going to move on this?” Jade popped the same question Drake asked every time he talked to Jason or Jacob.

“When Dixon tells us he has what we need and not before. Like I said, he called me after he called Drake. Dixon advised me to stand down. He has been put in a tough situation and has relayed details about what is going on.” Jason held up a hand and stopped Jacob and Jared’s questions. “Nothing I can, or will, share at this time. He wanted my assurance that nobody was coming in after him. His path forward is treacherous, and he doesn’t want to worry about one of us getting hurt, especially Drake.” Jason looked directly at Drake. “His words. Not mine.”

“I still don’t like it,” Jacob spoke in a low voice, but it was heard over the two little boys’ laughter.

“You don’t have to like it. Just trust that boy to know when to call for backup.” Frank’s words carried weight and wisdom, but Drake still hated it. Hated being sidelined while Dixon hung out on the edge of the precipice.

Amanda cleared her throat. “What about Chief and Taty?”

Jason smiled. “Well, those two are a different story. They delivered a package to us, but they went back overseas. They had one more lead to track down in Europe before they came home.”

“I really hope they find her sister.” Jewell took a sip of her hot chocolate after she spoke.

“After all these years?” Tori closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. “I pray they find the woman. If she is still alive, she’ll need a safe place to heal.”

“If she can.” Jasmine nodded. She held a sleeping Chloe in her arms while Chad’s arms wrapped around both of them.

Jason cleared his throat, bringing attention back to him. “We have one more Christmas present to give the family.” He

looked down and Faith and smiled. The woman's blush was immediate. She nodded, and Jason smiled before he turned to the room and announced, "We're pregnant."

The immediate cheer brought the older kids back in, and Faith knelt down to whisper in Reece's ear. The little boy lit up like a fireworks display.

"Really?" When Faith nodded, he jumped up in the air. "A boy, Momma! You have to have a brother for me! Talon has all brothers. I want a brother, too!"

"Brothers are cool." Talon chimed in.

"Girls are cool, too!" Lizzy stood with her hands on her hips glaring at the two boys.

Talon nodded. "Maybe, but I don't have a sister, so I don't know."

Lizzy dropped her hands. "That's okay. You can borrow me, right, Momma?"

Keelee laughed, rubbing her forehead as she took in the children beseeching her for an answer. "Sure honey, but he needs to give you back."

"Awesome!" Talon shouted and dashed back to the foyer where they'd set up their play area. The others ran after him as congratulations continued. Drake shook Jason's hand and hugged Faith. He wished Dixon was here to know he was going to be an uncle again. The hole he felt from his twin's absence was a constant thing.

Frank stood beside him. "Trust in your brother."

He glanced at Frank before finding Jillian with his eyes. "I do trust him." He nodded to the crowd around Jason. "I trust my family; but I won't lie and tell you I'm not worried about all of them."

Frank put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "Welcome to my world, son."

Drake dropped his head. "How do you stay so calm? This is killing me."

Frank grunted before he reached into his pocket and handed Drake a piece of candy. “Son, you take every minute as it comes and thank God you have a heart that beats even though it bleeds for those you love.”

Drake nodded and focused on the wax wrapper around the taffy. Frank squeezed his shoulder and ambled over to the group. Drake looked up to the star on the top of the Christmas tree. “Merry Christmas, D. I love you man.”

The End

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